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# Older Lesbian Perspectives on “Marriage” and “Same-Sex Marriage”

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OLDER LESBIAN PERSPECTIVES ON "MARRIAGE" AND "SAME-SEX  
MARRIAGE": A STUDY OF MEANINGS AND EMOTIONS OVER THE LIFESPAN

BY  
JEAN POWELL

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS  
IN  
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UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

1997

MASTER OF ARTS THESIS

OF

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APPROVED:

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DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

1997

## **Abstract**

This study examined older lesbian views of marriage and same-sex marriage, using in-depth interviews and grounded theory methodology for data analysis. The sample consisted of ten lesbians of diverse ethnicities, between 51 and 60 years of age. Two were Portuguese American, three were African American, and five were European American. Five participants had been previously married in a traditional male-female marriage (Group 1), and five participants had never been in a male-female marriage (Group 2). All participants were in a committed relationship with a woman, or had been in a long-term lesbian relationship.

Grounded theory analysis of interview transcripts identified five major themes that were shared by informants in both groups: 1) eight of the ten participants reported that they had directly paid a price in their lives as a result of not having access to legal same-sex marriage; 2) all participants viewed same-sex marriage as a civil right; 3) all participants reported that legalizing same-sex marriage would be beneficial for lesbian and gay people, and for society as a whole, with few disadvantages; 4) all participants reported key turning points in their lives in reference to marriage and same-sex marriage; and 5) the life-stories of all ten participants expressed remarkable resilience and courage in the face of homophobic society.

Three intriguing differences in core themes were found in Group 1 and Group 2 data. All of the women who had been previously married remembered wanting to have children very much, and married with the intention of having children; they reported their "lesbian identity quest" in considerable detail; and they expressed concern about sexual fulfillment as a key issue in their struggle to transform the conditions of their lives to be congruent with a core lesbian identity. In marked contrast, the participants in Group 2

did not have any interest in having children, did not report any struggle associated with self-identifying as lesbian, and did not discuss sexuality at all.

The informants attached multiple meanings to “marriage,” ranging from “the All American Dream,” to a “container for selfhood.” However, they described their own long-term lesbian relationships as “marriages,” and tended to ignore the legal dimension of civil marriage, while believing in their own minds that they are, in fact, married to their partners. Meanings attached to marriage were not distinctively different when referencing male-female marriage than when referencing same-sex marriage.

Given the absence of scientific literature on older lesbians lives and same-sex marriage, these exploratory findings contribute to much needed knowledge of older lesbian perspectives on the topic of marriage and same-sex marriage – an issue of considerable importance in the long struggle for lesbian and gay equality in a heterosexist social world.

## Acknowledgments

Many people have contributed to the development of this thesis. I want to thank my major professor, Dr. Bernice Lott, a social psychologist, feminist, political activist, and mentor to a very long list of graduate students. Her intellectual generosity with her students, and her dedication to their work, even when it is removed from her own research interests, are extraordinary qualities in academia. She has provided direction and meticulous feedback whenever I have asked for this, at other times leaving me completely free to develop my own research style, a combination which has been and continues to be vital to my intellectual development.

I am also grateful to have an ideal thesis committee, which in addition to Dr. Bernice Lott, included Dr. Phil Clark, Dr. Mary Ellen Reilly, and Dr. Paul Florin. Each made invaluable contributions to this thesis. Dr. Phil Clark offered a gerontological and life-story perspective that is central to my own work. Dr. Mary Ellen Reilly offered a women's studies perspective, as well as her knowledge of lesbian identity in the 20th century. She also helped me contact women who agreed to participate in this research. Dr. Paul Florin provided an essential stack of journal articles on qualitative research, much of which I incorporated into the Methods section.

Other individuals contributed significantly. Dr. Grace Frenzel, a clinical psychologist, agreed to serve as Chair for the thesis defense. Her regard for the people she interacts with on a daily basis, and her sensitivity to the individual person are models for my own professional style. Dr. Lynn Pasquerella is a philosopher who specializes in law and ethics. She generously helped me obtain dozens of legal briefs that contributed pivotally to the development of my thinking about marriage and same-sex marriage. Dr. Charlie Collyer, a cognitive psychologist, provided me an opportunity to write a

comprehensive paper on grounded theory methodology during his class on psychological research methods. I also appreciate my friends, Sharyn and Julie, Jane and Jennifer, Petra, Kelly, and Gary, all of whom supported me throughout this project, and waited patiently for the results. Gary read a draft of the entire thesis and gave me positive feedback in preparation for my defense. The members of my women's group, whom I travel to work with each year for one week of intensive life examination, have contributed immeasurably to the quality of my life and intellectual integrity. Danielle also continues to wisely support my increasing skill in the social world, while consistently affirming that the best intellectual work emerges from the center of one's authentic self – from working with one's heart and mind. Harriet has generously supported and inspired my academic work at every turn over the last two years. This project would have been far more difficult without her warmth and balance. She is patiently looking forward to a time when I can resume a normal life.

I am especially grateful to the ten women who agreed to participate in the lengthy interviews for this research. They each inspired me in more ways than I could possibly express in this thesis. Their voices and their perspectives are the core of this work. With all my heart, I thank these wise women. My hope is that our culture will increasingly listen to the voices of our elders. It is certain that we are enriched and empowered by their points-of-view.

Lastly, but not least, I want to thank my mother, a woman of remarkable strength and resilience, who has managed a very complex life with utmost dignity, while providing support, loyalty, and love to all of her five children. She has worked her entire life and been the sole source of support for her children throughout most of her life as a parent. At age 74, she is vigorous, physically fit, and involved – a model of successful aging.

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## Introduction

This master's thesis is the result of several years of thinking, reading, and being involved politically and emotionally with the topic of same-sex marriage. As a lesbian, I am deeply concerned with the extent to which personal liberty is abridged by the exclusion of *all* homosexual citizens from the constitutionally protected right to marry the life-partner of one's choice. Gay and lesbian citizens have the peculiar status of being the *only* class of citizens now excluded from legal civil marriage (Eskridge, 1996), and this is true despite the fact that "the United States Supreme Court has recognized for over 50 years that marriage is a basic civil right" (Baehr v. Lewin, 1996, FN 30). That I was not able to marry my lesbian partner of eight years, a citizen of another country, profoundly affected both of our individual lives and the quality of our relationship. As I observed my partner struggling to live in the United States for seven years as "an illegal alien" – a status which was a direct consequence of our not being permitted to enter a legal, civil marriage, and as I worried increasingly about her detection, my dismay and outrage over the exclusion of homosexuals from the institution of civil marriage deepened. Out of this outrage and despair, the desire to become more precisely informed about the meaning of marriage began to take root, and this master's thesis is the final result. Thus, my life experience provides the impetus for this research project which has both personal meaning and political relevance at a critical point in the long history of the gay and lesbian struggle for civil equality. Sadly, as I prepared the final results, my former partner was deported from the U.S. Virgin Islands where she had naively gone to vacation with a family member she had not seen in two years. Given the new knowledge I have gained from conducting this research, such as the fact that the United States Supreme Court has long viewed marriage as one of the "fundamental rights of man" (Loving v. Virginia, 1966), I am optimistic that I

will see legal same-sex civil marriage in my life-time, a possibility I did not dream of when I came out as a lesbian twenty years ago.

The issue of legalizing same-sex marriage has stirred passions and produced vitriolic debate across the United States, and this debate is likely to continue for many years. Popular magazines and major newspapers, such as Time, Newsweek, U.S News and World Report, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, the San Francisco Examiner, the Providence Journal, to name just a few, carry a stream of articles and editorials about the merits or demerits of legalizing same-sex or “gay” marriage. A sampling of titles in print media point to a deep national concern with whether homosexuals in the United States shall be permitted to engage in the constitutionally protected freedom to marry. Such titles include, “The Freedom to Marry” (Staff, New York Times, 1996, April 7); “State of the Union” (Bonhall, Los Angeles Times, 1994, March 6); “Til Death Do Us Part” (Bull, The Advocate, 1993); “Why I Changed My Mind [to support gay marriage]” (Callahan, Commonweal, 1994, April 22); “Gay Lesbian Marriage—Same Sex Ban is Like Ban on Interracial Couples” (Anonymous, Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 1996, March 21); “What’s Wrong with Gay and Lesbian Marriages?” (Ahlbum, The Providence Journal—Bulletin, 1996, February 10); “Let Gays Marry” (Sullivan, Newsweek, 1996, June 3); or “Leave Marriage Alone” (Bennett, Newsweek, 1996, June 3).

It is not at all surprising that “gay” marriage is a source of controversy in small towns, city councils, churches, synagogues, state legislatures, Congress and presidential politics. Few subjects matter more to Americans than the venerable institutions of marriage and family. While marriage and family play a pivotal role in heterosexual social life, gay men and lesbians have traditionally been defined by many Americans as existing “outside the family” (Bray & Barret, 1995, p.15). When traditional views on the meaning of marriage and family intersect with a tradition of civil rights in the United States and a history of animus toward homosexuals, the ensuing national debate is certain to be impassioned. The national debate occurring right now on “gay” or “same-sex” legal, civil

marriage is intense. While an ominous political and legal battle is brewing, with the outcome still uncertain, it is my hope that we are witnessing a profound transformation in the socially-constructed, heterosexist institution of marriage, one that will have profound consequences for the civil equality of gay and lesbian people in the United States.

Such a moment in history as this, when impending change in the major cultural institution of marriage may potentially re-shape or powerfully affect the phenomenology of gay and lesbian identity, is an especially significant time to initiate relevant empirical research. The legalization of same-sex marriage will exert new influences on the lived experience of gays and lesbians in American society. Since legal same-sex marriage has never previously existed in this country, there is no social science currently available to predict the impact legal marriage might have on gay and lesbian behavior. Eskridge (1996) speculates that legalizing same-sex marriage will “civilize America” by countering a national climate of intolerance toward lesbian and gay people. Other speculative questions arise, such as “Will gay men and lesbians begin to parent more children within the supportive legal framework of marriage?”; “Will the construct of family become more meaningful and accessible to gays and lesbians?”; “Will legal same-sex marriage facilitate more inter-generational contact among homosexual children, adolescents, adults and elders – contact that is pivotal to the cultural-historical identity of social groups?”; “Will inclusion in civil marriage pave the ground for homosexuals to enjoy more social status and a less contested social identity?” While such broad speculative questions do not represent the specific research questions I have attempted to answer, the results of this exploratory research point to directions for further research on lesbian and gay intimate relationships in the context of *a newly emerging social-historical period*, one in which our intimate, romantic relationships are legally recognized as valid by state and federal law.

The research I have conducted is a life story approach for exploring meanings and emotions associated with marriage and same-sex marriage over the life span of *older* lesbian women. I have not attempted to study the aging process per se; I have explored the meaning

of marriage from the specific vantage point of the informants who are self-identified lesbians and at least fifty years of age. Kaufman's (1986) classic work on the continuity of identity across the lifespan supports the value of employing a life story, in-depth interview, approach: "Because lives are lived in a cultural context, the life story is constructed from that context, allowing us to see how cultural sources are employed in the formulation of identity" (p. 24). My goal has been precisely this, to see how marriage as a "cultural source" has moved or been the catalyst for specific meanings and emotions in the lives of the older lesbians I interviewed. I have focused on the viewpoints of older lesbians because they are an important subgroup within gay and lesbian culture, and one that is too often overlooked and unheard. I believe the wisdom lesbian elders have accumulated from living a fairly long life helps to illuminate the multiplicity of meanings attached to both heterosexual marriage and same-sex marriage.

## **Literature Review**

### **Terminology**

In this thesis, the term "marriage" refers specifically to the institution of heterosexual legal marriage. As currently constructed by legal and social tradition, "marriage" is, by definition, the legal union between a woman and a man who are assumed by the state to be heterosexual. Although I use the descriptive term "heterosexual marriage" throughout this thesis, in fact, the use of "heterosexual" is a misnomer in this context. It is well known that many individuals in so-called heterosexual marriages are neither primarily nor exclusively heterosexual. Furthermore, individuals in a heterosexual marriage (or in a same-sex marriage) may not engage in a sexual relationship at all, which further casts doubt on the accuracy of the expression, "heterosexual marriage." The term "opposite-sex marriage" is even less satisfactory because it fosters the fallacy that the two sexes distinguished by reproductive characteristics are in some sense "opposite." We know from decades of research on sex and gender that nothing could be further from reality. The

notion of two sexes may itself be a fallacy, a convenient belief for a society with primitive beliefs about gender. For this reason, I have also avoided the designation “two-sex marriage” although this is at least grammatically parallel to “same-sex marriage.” Thus, my decision is to continue to use the conventional designation “heterosexual marriage” despite the inaccuracy of this language.

I use the terms “civil marriage” and “marriage” synonymously. Both terms refer to the state-sanctioned and state-regulated relationship between a female and male adult. Occasionally I specify the term “civil marriage” to emphasize the legal nature of the marriage contract or to emphasize the distinction between legal marriage and religious ceremonies of union that have symbolic meaning but no legal status. The term “same-sex marriage” always refers to legal, civil marriage, which is not yet a reality in the United States. “Same-sex marriage” is not to be confused with “celebrations of commitment,” currently the only option available to gay men and lesbians who want to publicly declare their union.

Civil marriage and religious ceremony are closely intertwined in practice in the United States because ordained ministers and rabbis have the state-granted authority to sign and validate the state-issued marriage license, just as bona-fide state employees such as town clerks or justices of the peace are permitted to do. According to the historian John Boswell, who has traced same-sex unions from the Early Christian Era to the Middle Ages (1994), gays and lesbians have been celebrating long-term commitments to love and honor each other in religious ceremonies for centuries. This history of gay and lesbian religious ceremonies helps to illuminate the social construction of intimate relationships, including homosexual relationships, in the Western world, but religiously-sanctioned same-sex unions have never had *legal* legitimacy in this country, or in any other country. Religious ceremonies, such as those conducted by the Metropolitan Community Church, do not bestow upon homosexual couples the array of legal benefits and obligations that automatically fall to heterosexual couple upon issuance of a state marriage license.

### **Domestic Partnership versus Same-Sex Marriage**

Efforts beginning in the 1980s to obtain “domestic partnership” status for gays, lesbians and non-married heterosexual partners is a different approach to gaining social and legal equality for gay and lesbian relationships. The AIDS epidemic has played a large role in the movement for domestic partnership benefits as committed gay couples recognized the need for joint health care coverage and hospitalization visitation privileges. The first domestic partnership bill was passed by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1982, but it was vetoed by Mayor Diane Feinstein. I was actually living in Berkeley in 1984 when the Berkeley City Council adopted the first municipal domestic partnership program which allowed city employees to obtain health benefits for their registered partners. Since this ordinance impacted only city employees and only those employees willing to “register” I did not observe a noticeable impact on gay and lesbian life in Berkeley. A few other liberal municipalities have adopted similar domestic partnership ordinances for city employees – West Hollywood (1985), Santa Cruz (1986), Los Angeles (1988), Seattle and New York City (1989), San Francisco (1990), Washington, D.C. (1991), Chicago and Baltimore (1993), New Orleans and San Diego ((1994), and Denver (1995). Also, hundreds of corporations around the United States have instituted some form of health benefit coverage for registered partners, although, unlike a married spouse, the employed domestic partner must pay taxes on the employer subsidy for partner benefits, or even worse, the employed domestic partner actually pays for partner benefits that are fully subsidized by the employer for married spouses!

Domestic partnership initiatives represent a first step toward recognizing same-sex intimate relationships, but this approach will never achieve what the simple statement, “I do,” and a state-conferred marriage license accomplishes in a matter of seconds. There are several reasons why this is the case. First, marriage laws in each of the fifty states represent over a century of codified statutory law governing marriage. While the core list of legal rights and obligations are shared by the states, each state has its own legal tradition.



For example, the state of California has over three hundred laws pertaining to marriage. The complexity of state marriage law, combined with federal law and constitutional law, make it absolutely untenable that piecemeal, local ordinances will ever equal the imposing array of legal rights automatically bestowed upon those who are legally permitted to obtain a marriage license. Secondly, domestic partnership programs are initiated through majority vote and can be blown away instantly with every membership shift in a city council or state legislature or corporate executive board.

In the view of most gay and lesbian activists, domestic partnership represents a logically misguided effort to obtain a few paltry benefits that are decidedly “separate and unequal” compared to the those conferred by civil marriage. In fact, domestic partnership programs actually have the deleterious effect of affirming a “separate but unequal status” for same-sex relationships. Bob Stauffer, a heterosexual member of the Hawaiian Commission on Sexual Orientation and the Law, wryly comments on domestic partnership initiatives, *“It’s like saying to Rosa Parks, ‘We’re going to put air conditioning in the back of the bus.’ All the examples of domestic partnership are separate but unequal [italics added]”* (cited in Underwood and Shenitz, 1995, Dec. 11). Heterosexual Americans do not have to put up with the vagaries of popular opinion when they want to get married; homosexual Americans should not tolerate “sitting at the back of the bus” with regard to a fundamental civil right to marriage that has been eloquently and powerfully mandated in U.S. Supreme Court decisions over the last one hundred years.

### **From Grassroots to Presidential Politics**

It is illustrative to note the number of popular books appearing on this topic, e.g., Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe (Boswell, 1994), The Essential Guide to Gay and Lesbian Weddings (Ayers & Brown, 1994), Ceremonies of the Heart: Celebrating Lesbian Unions (Butler, 1990), From Sexual Liberty to Civilized Commitment: The Case for Same-Sex Marriage (Eskridge, 1996), and Legally Wed: Same-Sex Marriage and the Constitution (Strasser, 1997). Television and radio talk shows are also appearing with

more frequency on the subject of same-sex marriage, coverage that was unimaginable only a few short years ago. Oprah Winfrey brought together key national activists on both sides of the issue of legal “gay” marriage in a Spring 1996 show. Another popular television show, *Friends*, presented several segments leading up to the lesbian “commitment ceremony” between the recently divorced main character and her lover. In a provocative twist for mainstream Americans, the divorced husband, in a show of support and affection for his former wife, was the “best man” and gave her away to her lesbian life-partner – in a full wedding-like ceremony! Here at the University of Rhode Island, Reverend Bill Bartels, an ordained Protestant minister conducted a public “ceremony of union” for two lesbian lovers, each of whom took the marriage vow “to protect and honor each other throughout their lives” with an appreciative audience, many of whom were in tears, at the Annual Symposium on Gay, Lesbian, and Bi-sexual Identity (April, 1996).

Despite that fact the “commitment ceremonies” have no legal status and, unlike heterosexual “weddings,” do *not* mark the entrance into state-sanctioned marriage, these rites of union do hold important symbolic, and often religious meaning for participants. The fact is that gay men and lesbians in contemporary America are creating rituals of commitment in record numbers in supportive churches and synagogues, in private homes, on beaches and in parks, and in symbolic mass ceremonies such as the March 1996 wedding on the steps of San Francisco City Hall where two hundred gay and lesbian couples took life-long partnership vows (Smolowe, 1996, April 29). The Metropolitan Community Church, founded in 1968 for gays who feel uncomfortable in other churches, performs thousands of gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies each year. In one year alone, the pastor in Costa Mesa, California performed 50 ceremonies, complete with pastoral counseling prior to the ceremonies (Bonhall, 1994). Reverend Thomas Ahlburn of the Unitarian Church in Providence, Rhode Island has performed hundreds of gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies (Ahlburn, 1996, February 10). Whatever the social-historical reasons might be, such as increased social status, increased pride, or heightened

cultural ferment that historically accompanies millennial transitions, gay and lesbian people are moving forward today to affirm “the most important relationship in life” (Maynard v. Hill, 1887), our children, our families, and our personal dignity through private and public ceremonies, the non-legal options currently available to us.

Whether or not the right to *legal marriage* is eventually granted to gay men and lesbians by a U.S. Supreme Court decision or by legislative, democratic process, the stakes in the final outcome are high. For those in support of legalizing gay marriage, the civil equality of gay and lesbian people, and for those in opposition to legalizing gay marriage, the very fabric of Western civilization, are at stake. Reverend Lou Sheldon, the national leader of the Traditional Values Coalition, has committed his organization to a “do or die” fight against legal gay marriage. In his view, “This is a front burner issue, because if you destroy the heterosexual ethic, then you are destroying a major pillar of Western civilization” (cited in Bray & Barrett, 1995, p. 9). The counterpoint to Rev. Sheldon’s position is articulated by gay activist and theorist, Andrew Sullivan (1993):

The critical measure necessary for full gay equality is something deeper and more emotional perhaps than even the military. It is equal access to marriage. As with the military, this is a question of formal public discrimination. If the military ban deals with the heart of what it is to be a citizen, *the marriage ban deals with the core of what it is to be a member of civil society* [italics added]. Marriage is not simply a private contract; it is a social and public recognition of a private commitment. As such, it is the highest public recognition of our personal integrity. Denying it to gay people is the most public affront possible to their civil quality..... The euphemisms – and the brave attempt to pretend that gay people don’t need marriage – do not successfully conceal the true emotional cost and psychological damage that this signal exacts. No true progress in the potential happiness of gay teenagers or in the stability of gay adults or in the

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full integration of gay and straight life is possible, or even imaginable, without it (p.37).

Legislative efforts to stomp out the possibility of gay marriage provide a view of the national scope and gravity of this end-of-the-century civil rights battle. As of June 3, 1996, a total of thirty-three states introduced legislation to ban same-sex marriage. In eighteen of these states, the proposals were defeated, withdrawn, or vetoed. However, by June 1996, nine states passed anti-gay marriage laws – Alaska, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, South Dakota, Kansas, Oklahoma, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Georgia (Newsweek, June 3, 1996, Kaplan & Klaidman; and Forum on the Right to Marriage, May 1996). Disturbingly, by September 1997 *a total of thirty states have passed laws explicitly prohibiting same-sex marriage* (Forum on the Right to Marriage, September 1997).

All of these state-by-state battles were reinforced on May 8, 1996 when The Defense of Marriage Act (HR3369) was introduced in the U.S. Congress by Sen. Bob Nickles, R-Okla., and Rep. Bob Barr, R-Ga. This law absolves *all* states of the obligation to recognize same-sex marriages performed in another state, such as Hawaii (Providence Journal, 1996, May 9, p. A-17; Forum on the Right to Marry, p. 1). Sadly, The Defense of Marriage Act was passed by the House on July 12, 1996 by an alarming majority, with a vote of 342-67, and it passed the U.S. Senate on September 10, 1996 by a similar majority of 85-14. President Clinton signed The Defense of Marriage Act into law just prior to the 1996 presidential election. Senator Trent Lott, the Republican majority leader, sagely explained that The Defense of Marriage Act is “not mean-spirited or exclusionary. It is intended to make sure a handful of judges, in a single state, cannot impose a radical social agenda upon the entire nation”(Schmitt, 1996, September 11, p. 1).

Opponents of same-sex marriage continue to be organized with financial support from national Christian Right organizations, including conservative “pro-family” organizations such as Concerned Maine Families, Colorado for Family Values, and Concerned Women for America. A leader of Concerned Women for America, one of the

most influential Christian fundamentalist organizations in the United States, stated recently in Time magazine, "It [Civil marriage for gays] will be *the* most important issue our country will face in this decade *and perhaps for all time* [italics added], because it could redefine the family" (Smolowe, 1996, April 29, p. 69). Time magazine also reported that the Christian Right is promoting anti-homosexual sentiment in small, grassroots political arenas, away from the glare of national media, as part of an organized national campaign to ban legal gay marriage. In the small town of Byron Center, Michigan (population 6,500), a gay high school music teacher, Gerry Crane, was relentlessly harassed by local religious conservatives after word of his commitment ceremony in a nearby city leaked out at his school:

The parents of Crane's 140 students were mailed packages that bore no return address and contained the anti-gay video called *Gay Rights/Special Rights*, produced by the California-based Traditional Values Coalition: a 100-page anti-gay treatise titled "Setting the record straight," ...and a letter exhorting parents to 'perceive the grave dangers that your child is facing.' ...The mailing had its intended effect. Since October [1995], 26 students have dropped out of Crane's classroom" (Smolowe, 1996, April 29).

This same article concludes, "The grass-roots sentiments help propel *the religious right's top priority for this year: to stomp out the possibility of civil marriages for gays* [italics added]."

To counter the rhetoric of the Christian Right, gays and lesbians and allies have organized in coalitions to fight for the constitutional right to marry. In 1995, a large number of gay and lesbian civil rights organizations worked together to produce a written document called The Marriage Resolution. The Lambda Legal Defense And Education Fund Marriage Project produced the final draft which states:

Because marriage is a basic human right and an individual personal choice; RESOLVED, the State should not interfere with same-gender couples who choose to marry and share fully and equally in the rights, responsibilities, and commitment of civil marriage (Bray & Barrett, 1995, p. 17).

The Marriage Resolution is being circulated nation-wide and the list of organizations in support continues to grow. Amelia Craig, the Executive Director of Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD), and a civil rights lawyer, has stated, "Whether or not you believe in marriage as an institution, we [gays and lesbians] have to face a potential for backlash *which dwarfs the controversy surrounding gays and lesbians in the military*" (Internet Marriage List, #253, 1996, Feb. 9). Robert Bray, a National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Field organizer, also comments, "It [marriage] is coming at us like a 3,000-ton locomotive. We can pretend it's not and risk another gays-in-the-military debacle, or we can educate ourselves, foster a discussion in our own community, organize and drive the issue from the grassroots up" (Bray & Barrett, p. 5).

In Election '96 both presidential candidates came out strongly against same-sex marriage. Many political strategists believed that President Clinton would weaken his re-election bid by supporting same-sex marriage, a position Republican strategists had hoped to maneuver him into. It is worthwhile to point out the level of legitimacy that prejudice and animus toward homosexuals holds in American politics: presidential candidates are expected to grapple with highly charged issues of race, racism, and affirmative action, yet they cannot touch the issue of including homosexual citizens equally as full citizens of the United States, with attendant rights and responsibilities. A moral stand against anti-gay prejudice – a stand one might reasonably expect of candidates for national leadership – is politically untenable, as demonstrated by the turmoil in the Clinton administration following his suggestion that it might be time for this most democratic of countries to permit gay people to serve openly in the military. Among prominent American political leaders, former President Jimmy Carter stands alone in rejecting the legitimacy of anti-homosexual

prejudice in American politics. Carter's eloquent statement was published in The Marriage List, an Internet resource for activists for same-sex marriage (1996, 20 May):

*No one should condone, even by silence, the persecution of homosexuals....*

Now leaders of the highly organized Christian Right have successfully injected in American political debate some divisive religious questions. The most vivid examples involve sexual preference.... Tragically, these issues have moved to the forefront of the 1996 presidential election scene..... We must make it clear that a platform of "I hate gay men and women" is not a way to become president of the United States.

Willie Brown, the mayor of San Francisco, also stands out as a political leader who endorses gay and lesbian civil equality, and legal same-sex marriage. Brown was present at the first mass gay marriage ceremony in the United States, held at City Hall in San Francisco in March 1996. Brown's spokesperson informed the press, "Mayor Brown believes that not only the city, but the State and the Nation, ought to recognize the diversity of the people in our society. *It's time for the world to recognize that same-sex couples are full participants in the American dream* [italics added]" (San Francisco Examiner, Reuters, March 21, 1996).

Perhaps, some decades after gay men and lesbians gain the basic civil liberty to choose whether and whom to marry, a statement of concern for the rights of homosexual citizens will not be viewed as jeopardizing a presidential candidate or endangering the "foundations" of Western Civilization.

### **"Do-it-Yourself" Marriages**

Determined homosexual couples can obtain the services of a lawyer and attempt to duplicate some of the legal protections afforded by legal marriage through a series of legal documents. However, these "do-it-yourself marriages" (Eskridge, p. 69) still fall far short of powerful benefits that can be obtained only through a marriage license. Bonhall (1994, March 6) points out:



Although gay partners sometimes have lawyers draft contracts and agreements that attempt to duplicate marriage benefits, it is estimated that such agreements can address only 60% of what is covered in heterosexual marriage. For example, the agreements cannot guarantee the same protections in areas such as child custody, pension plans, health coverage and social security benefits (p. E7).

Bonhall does not mention another important difference between “do it yourself marriages,” and civil marriage: legal documents available to even the wealthiest homosexuals still do not permit “privileged relationship status”(Eskridge,1996) to a foreign-born, non-American lover. A gay or lesbian citizen has no legal ground for requesting visa and residency status for a non-American lover. Thus, gays and lesbians who happen to fall in love with a foreign-born partner can foresee their relationship thwarted or potentially torn apart by a deportation order from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, which continues to refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of homosexual partnerships. Access to civil marriage is the only way to ensure that lesbians and gay men with non-American lovers have the equal right to bring their partners into the United States – a right which is currently granted automatically to heterosexual Americans married to non-American lovers.

“Do-it-yourself” marriages unfairly burden homosexual partners with legal expenses that heterosexual married couples do not incur because marriage provides a ready-made, package deal of legal rights and obligations. The process of setting up legal documents that simulate some of the rights associated with marriage is so complicated and costly, in fact, that only the most privileged homosexual couples can consider such an “alternative” to legal marriage. The Hawaii Commission on Sexual Orientation and the Law that recommended that Hawaii legalize same-sex marriage observed:

These documents [to simulate rights associated with marriage] often require the costly service of a lawyer. Marriage allows a couple to save the money and time costs associated with drawing up theses documents.

These economic benefits can be significant, amounting to several thousand dollars” (Rostow, 1995, March 21, p. 2).

Republican Representative Pete Knight (R-Palmdale, California) unwittingly bolstered the argument for same-sex marriage by reporting a \$56,800 “documentation cost” for assembling the legal documents that marriage automatically grants to consenting heterosexual parties (Rostow, 1995, March 21, p. 2). Rep. Knight erroneously interpreted this “documentation cost” as a cost *to American taxpayers* for recognizing same-sex marriage. However, the economist and public affairs specialist who originally presented this figure in testimony to the Hawaii Commission on Sexual Orientation (La Croix at the University of Hawaii and public affairs Professor Badget at the University of Maryland) identified \$56,800 as *the cost to lesbian and gay couples* for “what it would cost in theory to assemble the legal documents that a marriage automatically represents” (Rostow, 1995, March 21, p. 1). What is clear from this analysis of a financial burden unfairly imposed upon one class of citizens – homosexuals – is that state and federal law are doing an awful lot of free legal work for heterosexual married couples.

To fully appreciate the difference between the benefits granted by existing domestic partnership programs (or “do-it-yourself” marriages) and civil marriage, it is instructive to review the list of core rights, benefits, and obligations associated with marriage, presented in the next section.

### **Rights, Benefits, and Obligations Associated with Marriage**

The following list of basic rights, benefits, and obligations associated with marriage that are shared among the fifty states and the District of Columbia is from Eskridge (1996, pp. 66-67).

- The right to receive, or the obligation to provide, spousal support and (in the event of separation or divorce) alimony and an equitable division of property

- Preference in being appointed the personal representative of a spouse who dies without a will
- Priority in being appointed guardian of an incapacitated individual or in being recognized as acting for an incapacitated person in making health care decisions
- All manner of rights relating to the involuntary hospitalization of the spouse, including the right to petition, the right to be notified, and the right to initiate proceedings leading to release
- The right to bring a lawsuit for the wrongful death of the spouse and for the intentional infliction of emotional distress through harm to one's spouse
- The right to spousal benefits statutorily guaranteed to public employees, including health and life insurance and disability payments, plus similar contractual benefits for private sector employees
- The right to invoke special state protection for "intrafamily offenses"
- The right to visit one's spouse on furlough while incarcerated in prison
- The right to claim an evidentiary privilege for marital communication
- A presumption of joint ownership of real estate as a tenancy in common and a right not to be held to a mortgage or assignment of rights to creditors without the spouse's written permission
- A right to priority in claiming human remains and to make anatomical donations on behalf of the deceased spouse
- Various inheritance rights, including priority in inheriting the property of the intestate decedent and the right to a family allowance
- The right for one's non-American spouse to qualify as an "immediate relative" (i.e., receive preferential immigration treatment) and become an American citizen under federal law

- The right to receive additional Social Security benefits based on the spouse's contribution
- Survivor's benefits on the death of a veteran spouse (pp. 66-67).

This demonstrates that when homosexual citizens are denied the right to marry a same-sex partner they are not denied just one right, they are denied dozens of rights, benefits, and obligations that have been designed to protect the longevity and stability of the marriage relationship. It is for this reason that Eskridge aptly describes marriage as “the most important right the state has to offer” (p. 8).

The overview of Hawaiian marriage rights and benefits presented in the Hawaii Supreme Court preliminary decision in Baehr v. Lewin (May 27, 1993) also provides an eye-opening, legalistic view of marriage rights:

Indeed, the state's monopoly on the business of marriage creation has been codified by statute for more than a century.....The applicant couples correctly contend that the Department of Health's refusal to allow them to marry on the basis that they are members of the same-sex deprives them of access to a multiplicity of rights and benefits that are contingent upon that status. Although it is unnecessary in this opinion to engage in an encyclopedic recitation of all of them, a number of the most salient marital rights and benefits are worthy of note. They include:

- (1) a variety of state income tax advantages.....
- (2) public assistance from and exemptions relating to the Department of Human Services.....
- (3) control, division, acquisition, and disposition of community property....
- (4) rights relating to dower, curtesy, and inheritance.....
- (5) rights to notice, protection, benefits, and inheritance.....
- (6) award of child custody and support payments in divorce proceedings.....
- (7) the right to spousal support.....

- (8) the right to enter into a premarital agreement.....
- (9) the right to change of name.....
- (10) the right to file a nonsupport action.....
- (11) post-divorce rights relating to support and property division.....
- (12) the benefit of spousal privilege and confidential marital communication.....
- (13) the benefit of the exemption of real property from attachment or execution.....
- (14) the right to bring a wrongful death action.....

For the present purposes, it is not disputed that the applicant couples would be entitled to all of these marital rights and benefits, but for the fact that they are denied access to the state-conferred legal status of marriage (p. 669, FN 18).

The ban on same-sex marriage represents a civil rights violation that is as significant and as egregious as the racist-imposed segregation of Black Americans and race-based restrictions on “separate public accommodations.” We have learned from the Black civil rights movement that the pretense of “separate but equal” disguises an ideology of prejudice. Similarly, we should recognize that while domestic partnership initiatives and “do-it-yourself-marriages” represent brave efforts on the part of homosexual couples to build some legal protection for their relationships and families, they are *unequal* to the civil right to marry.

### **Landmark U.S. Supreme Court Decisions**

Since the issue of same-sex marriage will almost certainly be brought to the U.S. Supreme Court, as has been the case historically when an issue of civil rights intersects with deep popular prejudice, the legal precedents which establish marriage as a basic civil right are an important conceptual framework for this research. The stirring words of some of the great Supreme Court Justices on the meaning of marriage have literally “awakened”

me to the significance of this cultural institution and the profound injustice of taking away the choice to marry from homosexual people. I believe that many gay and lesbian persons, myself included, have been unaware of the seriousness of this abridgment of personal liberty; the incalculable cost of this exclusion has not until recently been salient to us. Key passages in six landmark decisions present powerful arguments for every American's right to marry. The inclusion of these brilliant legal treatises demonstrates my belief that law and social science are linked endeavors, sharing the goal of contributing to civil society and human well-being. The legal literature on marriage and same-sex marriage is actually far in advance of social science literature, which curiously has no empirical literature on the effect of excluding homosexuals from marriage or the potential effect that legal same-sex marriage might have on lesbian and gay identity development.

#### **Maynard v. Hill (1887)**

The first Supreme Court decision that bears directly on all subsequent decisions pertaining to marriage is Maynard v. Hill (1887). The definition of marriage in the majority opinion delivered by Justice Field serves as the cornerstone to federal and state marriage law in the 20th century.

Marriage, *as creating the most important relation in life* [italics added], as having more to do with the morals and civilization of a people than any other institution, has always been subject to the control of the legislature.....Whilst marriage is often termed by text writers and in decisions of courts a civil contract – generally to indicate that it must be founded upon the agreement of the parties, and does not require any religious ceremony for its solemnization – it is something more than a mere contract.....It is an institution, in the maintenance of which in its purity the public is deeply interested, for it is the foundation of the family and of society, without which there would be neither civilization nor progress (194 U.S. 210).

As I read these stirring words about the profound significance of “marriage,” I cannot help but ponder, what is the impact on the identity of lesbians and gay men, and what is the impact on lesbian and gay relationships, to be excluded from “the most important relation in life?” Justice Field further defined the central importance of the marriage relationship:

[Marriage] is, rather, a social relation, like that of parent and child, the obligations of which arise not from the consent of concurring minds, but are the creation of the law itself; *a relation the most important, as affecting the happiness of individuals, the first step from barbarism to incipient civilization, the purest tie of social life and the true basis of human progress*[italics added].....[It is] the most elementary and useful of all the social relations....(194 U.S. 211).....[Marriage] is a great public institution, giving character to our whole civil polity (194 U.S. 213).

In view of the extreme importance attached to the “great public institution” of marriage, it is puzzling that so many people have for so long condoned, or certainly not questioned, a policy of “segregated relationships” for lesbians and gay men, as if it is entirely congruent with social justice that we are prohibited from participating in marriage.

Legal theorist Scott Kozuma (1994) has considered the possible consequences of excluding homosexuals from participating in the “most elementary and useful of all the social relations”:

Of the rights and privileges denied homosexuals, perhaps the most significant is access to the institution of marriage. Not only does this exclusion categorically deny gays and lesbians the economic and legal benefits available to heterosexuals, but it also imputes a stigma of illegitimacy to the homosexual class. It is perhaps this stigma, this intangible and seemingly indelible stamp, that has the most potent and destructive effects on their struggle for equal rights (p. 891).

Empirically-oriented social scientists need to begin to ask a set of questions about the impact of heterosexist social policies on persons who might choose to marry a person of the same sex. What is lost when a gay or lesbian adolescent cannot imagine the possibility of marrying a beloved partner? What are the consequences of not having the entitlement to dream about “marriage” which is so central to heterosexual courtship and love?

Constitutional law is certainly adamant about the fundamental importance of the “civil right” to marry

### **Skinner v. Oklahoma (1941)**

The Skinner v. Oklahoma (1941) decision was the first to unequivocally define the right to marriage as a “basic civil right.” This decision struck down an Oklahoma bill which required sterilization of persons convicted of felony offenses and further prohibited such persons from the right to marry. Justice Douglas, delivering the opinion of the court, wrote:

We are dealing here with legislations which involves *one of the basic civil rights of man* [italics added]. Marriage and procreation are fundamental to the very existence and survival of the race (316 U.S. 541).

Skinner v. Oklahoma is the basis for the correct assertion by lesbian and gay activists that the Supreme Court of the United States has recognized for over fifty years the special status of marriage as a protected civil right, and it has been cited in subsequent landmark marriage decisions, notably Loving v. Virginia (1966) and Baehr v. Lewin (1993).

### **Loving v. Virginia (1966)**

In the landmark civil rights decision Loving v. Virginia (1966), the U.S. Supreme Court struck down anti-miscegenation statutes banning interracial marriage. Chief Justice Warren wrote the opinion for the Court:

These [anti-miscegenation] statutes also deprive the Lovings of liberty without due process of law in violation of the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. *The freedom to marry has long been recognized as*



*one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free [men and women]. Marriage is one of the “basic civil rights of man,” fundamental to our very existence and survival [italics added].*

Skinner v. Oklahoma, 315 U.S. 535, 541 (1942). See also Maynard v. Hill, 125 U.S. 190 (1888). To deny this fundamental freedom on so unsupportable a basis as the racial classifications embodied in these statutes, classifications so directly subversive of the principle of equality at the heart of the Fourteenth Amendment, is surely to deprive all the State’s citizens of liberty without due process of law. The Fourteen Amendment requires that the freedom of choice to marry not be restricted by invidious racial discrimination. Under our Constitution, the freedom to marry, or not marry, a person of another race resides with the individual and cannot be infringed by the State. (388 U.S. 12, 1966)

At the time of the Loving v. Virginia decision in 1966, *sixteen* states had statutes which made interracial marriage a felony offense. As of 1949, a total of *thirty* states banned interracial marriage (Baehr v. Lewin, FN 24, 1993). The Virginia statutory code, as of 1966, specified the following punishment for interracial marriage:

*Punishment for marriage.* – If any white person intermarry with a colored person, or any colored person intermarry with a white person, *he* [or she] *shall be guilty of a felony and shall be punished by confinement in the penitentiary for not less than one nor more than five years.*

Today, most Americans do not even know that interracial marriage was a felony crime *as recently as 1966*, punishable with up to five years in prison. Today, while many Americans are racists and may disapprove of interracial marriage, most would not question that interracial couples *have the right to marry*. I would speculate that many, if not most, Americans would consider prohibition and punishment of such marriage to be a form of intolerance that is insupportable, almost unthinkable, within the American

tradition of equality. The Loving v. Virginia decision demonstrates that legislation passed democratically by a majority of citizens cannot be permitted to stand when they are founded upon animus toward a stigmatized class of citizens.

The Loving v. Virginia decision is extremely important to the issue of same-sex marriage because the “race-based restriction” on marriage and the justification for this are uncannily parallel to “sex-based restriction” on marriage and the religious arguments advanced to oppose the reasonable claim of homosexual citizens to the principle of equality at the heart of the Fourteenth Amendment. One chilling parallel is the remarkable similarity of language used in previous bans on interracial marriage and current bans on same-sex marriage that have now been passed by thirty states (Forum on the Right to Marriage, September 1997).

*South Dakota Bill* (under consideration February 16, 1995). – Any marriage between persons of the same gender is null and void from the beginning.

*Virginia Code 20-59* (1960). – All marriages between a white person and a colored person shall be absolutely void without any decree of divorce or other legal process (cited in Loving v. Virginia, 388 U.S. 4, 1966).

Evan Wolfson, head of Lambda’s Marriage Project states, “The similarities between these new bills and the old anti-miscegenation laws are obvious. Both target forbidden unions by deeming them legally ‘void’ from the beginning. Both are based on the idea that marriage is, by definition, restricted to certain people. Both argue that this is so natural it hardly needs defending” (cited in Rotello, 1995, February 16).

The second parallel between former anti-miscegenation statutes and today’s legislative bans on same-sex marriage is the appeal to “Almighty God” as the basis for denying rights to a class of people deemed outside “His natural order.” Note the following argument presented by the Virginia judge who sentenced the Lovings to one year in a Virginia jail before they appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court:

Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix (388 U.S. 3, 1966).

Chief Justice Warren described anti-miscegenation legislation supported by such specious reasoning as “*measures designed to maintain White Supremacy*” (388 U.S. 11, 1966). Similarly, bans on same-sex marriage are thinly veiled measures to maintain a supremacist ideology, i.e., an ideology of heterosexism. Anti-same-sex marriage rhetoric is also based on appeals to the Deity and the “natural complementarity of a man and a woman.”

The legal precedent established by Loving v. Virginia makes it more likely that in a few short decades Americans will look back at the controversy surrounding same-sex marriage in 1996-1997 and be dismayed that a nation founded on the principle of equality could have tolerated for so long such invidious prejudice against homosexual people.

**Baehr v. Lewin (1993, and still in process)**

The stimulus for the current national debate over same-sex marriage is a civil rights case now being decided by the Hawaii Supreme Court. In Baehr v. Lewin, the Hawaii State Supreme Court has already held that the prohibiting same-sex couples from marrying violates the Hawaii’s Constitutional Amendment which prohibits state-sanctioned discrimination against any person in exercise of her or his civil rights on the basis of sex.<sup>1</sup> Federal and state law require that any abridgment of a “fundamental liberty” sanctioned by the state must pass the highest judicial standard of “strict scrutiny.” To meet this standard the state must demonstrate that abridgment of the civil right in question is justified to satisfy “compelling state interests.” Since the ban on same-sex marriage is a clear violation of Hawaii’s Constitution, the Court returned the case to the First Circuit Court to provide the

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<sup>1</sup> Article I, section 5 of the Hawaii Constitution provides: No person shall be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law, nor be denied the equal protection of the laws, nor be denied the enjoyment of the person’s civil rights or be discriminated against in the exercise thereof because of race, religion, sex or ancestry. Haw. Const. art I, 5 (1978).

state an opportunity to meet the judicial standard of strict scrutiny. This judicial standard is precisely defined in Baehr v. Lewin, "Strict scrutiny analysis is applied to laws classifying on the basis of suspect categories or impinging upon fundamental rights expressly or impliedly granted by the Constitution, in which case laws are presumed to be unconstitutional unless state shows compelling state interests which justify such classifications and that the laws are narrowly drawn to avoid unnecessary abridgments of constitutional rights" (p. 652).

Legal theorists do not expect the state of Hawaii to meet the standard of strict scrutiny and, as a result, same-sex marriage will be legalized in Hawaii when the Supreme Court issues its final decision, which is still pending as of November, 1997. It is interesting to note that the Hawaii Supreme Court opinion refers extensively to Loving v. Virginia (1966), and in one remarkable passage forcefully rejects appeals to "Almighty God" advanced for both race-based and sex-based restrictions on marriage:

Analogously to Lewin's [the State of Hawaii] argument and the rationale of the Jones court [in Virginia], the Virginia courts declared that interracial marriage simply could not exist because the Deity had deemed such a union intrinsically unnatural, 388 U.S. at 3, and, in effect, because it had theretofore never been the "custom" of the state to recognize mixed marriages, marriage "always" having been construed to presuppose a different configuration. With all due respect to the Virginia courts of a bygone era, we do not believe that trial judges are the ultimate authorities on the subject of Divine Will, and, as Loving amply demonstrates, constitutional law may mandate, like it or not, that customs change with an evolving social order (FN26, p. 673).

The final Baehr v. Lewin decision could mark the beginning of mandating the legal extension of marriage to include same-sex unions, although this pending decision has already been countered by the anti-gay federal bill, The Defense of Marriage Act, which

passed both the House (July 12, 1996; 342-67) and the U.S. Senate (September 10, 1996; 85-14) by overwhelming majorities and was signed into law by President Clinton. This sweeping legislation denies Federal benefits to married people of the same sex and permits states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages that have been sanctioned in other states, a preemptive move which effectively dismantles same-sex marriage rights that might be achieved in Hawaii, or any other state.

**Zablocki v. Redhail (1977)**

Another Supreme Court decision of vital importance to the legal definition of marriage is Zablocki v. Redhail (1977). This case rejected a Wisconsin statute providing that any resident of that State “having minor issue not in his custody and which he is under obligation to support by any court order or judgment may not marry without a court approval order, which cannot be granted absent a showing that the support obligation has been met...” (434 U.S. 374). The Wisconsin statute was held to violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, specifically by unnecessarily impinging on the right to marry. Loving v. Virginia (1967) was cited in the first paragraph of the Zablocki decision:

Since the right to marry is of fundamental importance, e.g., Loving v. Virginia, 388 U.S. 1, ...critical examination of the state interests advanced in support of the [Wisconsin] classification is required (434 U.S. 374).

Justice Marshall, delivering the majority opinion for the Court, used Loving v. Virginia (1966) as a the key precedent for the Court’s decision and referred to it as, “The leading decision of the Court on the right to marry” (434 U.S. 383, 1977). Marshall reviewed all of the Court’s precedents upon which the right to marry for all individuals is founded:

Although Loving arose in the context of racial discrimination, prior and subsequent decisions of this Court confirm that the right to marry is of fundamental importance for all individuals. Long ago, in Maynard v. Hill, 125 U.S. 190 (1887), the Court characterized marriage as “the most

important relation in life,” *id.*, at 205, and as “the foundation of the family and society, without which there would be neither civilization nor progress,” *I.*, at 211. In Meyer v. Nebraska, 262 U.S. 390 (1923), the Court recognized that the right “to marry, establish a home and bring up children” is a central part of the liberty protected by the Due Process Clause, *id.*, at 399, and in Skinner v. Oklahoma ex re. Williamson, *supra*, marriage was describe as “fundamental to the very existence and survival of the race,” 316 U.S., at 541..... In Griswold v. Connecticut, 381 U.S. 479 (1965), the Court observed: “We deal with a right of privacy older than the Bill of Rights – older than our political parties, older than our school system. Marriage is a coming together for better or for worse, hopefully enduring, and intimate to the degree of being sacred. It is an association that promotes a way of life, not causes; a harmony in living, not political faiths; a bilateral loyalty, not commercial or social projects. Yet it is an association for as noble a purpose as any involved in our prior decisions.” *Id.*, at 486.... In Carey v. Population Services International, 431 U.S. 678 (1977), we declared, “*While the outer limits of [the right to personal privacy] have not been marked by the Court, it is clear that among the decisions that an individual may make without unjustified government interference are personal decisions relating to marriage*” (434 U.S. 384-385, 1977).

Justice Marshall’s opinion in Zablocki v. Redhail (1977) and the specific decisions I have highlighted, present a strong legal foundation for challenging the “one man, one woman” heterosexual marriage rule, provided that popular animus toward the stigmatized class of lesbian and gay citizens is not permitted to serve as a “majority rule” argument for abridging a fundamental civil right to choose whether and whom to marry.

**Romer v. Evans (May 20, 1996)**

This recent landmark ruling in support of lesbian and gay civil rights, the first such ruling in the history of the Supreme Court, gives many people further hope that the Court may eventually rule in favor of same-sex marriage. The majority decision, written by Justice Kennedy and joined by Justices John Paul Stevens, Sandra Day O'Connor, David Souter, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, and Stephen Breyer, struck down Amendment 2 to the Colorado Constitution. This amendment, which was passed by a narrow margin of Colorado voters (53%-47%) in a 1992 state-wide referendum, nullified all existing civil rights protections for homosexuals in the state and further barred the passage of new anti-discrimination laws designed to protect homosexuals. Because of legal challenges the amendment never took effect in Colorado, but it served as a model for similar anti-gay referendums in Florida, Maine, Ohio and Oregon. Justice Kennedy, who wrote the majority opinion, forcefully rejected the argument that Amendment 2 merely seeks to deprive homosexuals of "special rights" other citizens do not have. To the contrary, Justice Kennedy stated, the "sheer breadth [of Amendment 2] is so discontinuous with the reasons offered for it that the amendment seems inexplicable by anything but animus toward the class [of homosexuals]..." (cited in Greenhouse, 1996, May 21, p. A21). Kennedy sharply countered the anti-gay argument that homosexuals seek "special rights" other citizens do not have:

We find nothing special in the protections Amendment 2 withholds. These are protections taken for granted by most people either because they already have them or do not need them; these are protections against exclusion from an almost limitless number of transactions and endeavors that constitute ordinary civil life in a free society" (cited in Greenhouse, 1996, May 21).

The right to marry a partner of one's choice is exactly one of those rights that heterosexual Americans take for granted, and one which, until recently, many homosexual Americans have also taken for granted did not extend to us, as if our

status as a homosexuals somehow naturally disqualifies us from the right to choose a marriage partner.

### **The Civil Right to Marry versus Critiques of Marriage**

Although the legal precedents of the United States Supreme Court, beginning over one hundred years ago with Maynard v. Hill (1887), characterize marriage as a fundamental civil right of all individuals, and one that is protected by the Due Process and Equal Rights Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment, it is important to distinguish arguments in favor of same-sex marriage from endorsements for the cultural institution of marriage. The issue in the same-sex marriage debate is whether one particular class of citizens will be permitted access to a civil right that all other classes of citizens now have. However, marriage is clearly a social institution that warrants careful and thoughtful critique (see Duclos, 1991). Marriage has historically served a number of ideological purposes, for example, male and heterosexual supremacy. That health benefits for Americans is in any way contingent upon the married state is egregious in a country that has the resources to provide universal health coverage. Critiques of marriage must not be confused with the civil rights issue at stake in preventing same sex couples from marrying. Participation in the cultural institution of civil marriage may corrupt gay and lesbian people, as some gay and lesbian activists claim, especially in view of the fact that marriage is such a sorry state for many heterosexual couples and their children. However, if the Due Process and Equal Rights Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution pertains to all citizens, then lesbians and gay men must have the same freedom to marry that other classes of citizens have. Only when we obtain this right, which should be inevitable in view of the legal precedents cited previously, can we move forward to transform certain characteristics of the institution of civil marriage. Just as the inclusion of women in the ministry has strengthened many Jewish and Christian congregations, gay and lesbian marriages may actually strengthen marriage as a “pillar of civilization” by stimulating public debate on the strengths and imperfections of the marriage contract. Perhaps granting the



right of all people to choose whether and whom to marry will have the effect of reaffirming marriage as the special vow it is – a binding commitment between two people to honor and protect each other and their families for life.

### **Social Construction and the Meaning of Marriage**

A “social constructionist” view of marriage holds that marriage, and every other social institution, evolves to meet changing needs, social mores, and economic pressures within a given culture. There is ample historical evidence to substantiate the “plasticity” of marriage in the context of social history. According to Boswell(1994), “Marriage is a socially, not naturally, constructed institution, tailored to fit society’s needs, mores, and beliefs” (cited in Ante, 1995, p.1). Boswell presents careful textual evidence that same-sex unions have existed and been recorded in the Judeo-Christian world well into the Middle Ages, prior to the Christian theological ambivalence toward non-procreative sexual unions and the consequent institutionalization of male-female “marriage” as a restraint upon sexuality. The legal scholar, William Eskridge, has also extensively documented the cross-cultural presence of same-sex unions (1996):

Evidence from other cultures and other times demonstrates that same-sex marriages are neither unprecedented nor unnatural. This is not to deny the modern West’s hostility to same-sex unions but merely to situate that hostility in a broader perspective. To say that same-sex marriage is a novelty is true from the point of view of a twentieth-century American but false from the point of view of a nineteenth-century Native American or African, a seventeenth-century Chinese merchant or Japanese samurai, a first-century Roman or Greek citizen, or an ancient Egyptian (p.7).

If marriage is demonstrably an institution that has evolved in response to socio-historical change, then the movement for legal same-sex marriage can be seen as a “natural” adaptation of marriage to a more civilized society in which the needs and rights of homosexual citizens are becoming more respected. The fact that interracial marriage is legal

today, but was a felony crime in sixteen states as recently as 1966, obviously supports a social constructionist view of marriage. There are many other examples that marriage has changed throughout history. Bray and Barrett (1995) point out that marriage was originally a patriarchal economic institution for the patrilineal distribution of property. Women were once viewed as the property of the husband, with no rights at all. This has changed. The feminist movement over the last two centuries has succeeded in de-gendering many of the rights and obligations of the marriage contract that have served male supremacy (see Hohengarten, 1994). Prior to the Civil War in the United States, slaves were prohibited from marrying. In Nazi Germany, the notorious Nuremberg laws stripped Jews of the right to marry non-Jews (Rotello, 1995, February 16).

A social constructionist history of marriage has important argumentative power in the same-sex marriage debate, because the opposing “essentialist view” of marriage has been cited consistently by judges and traditionalists as grounds for not recognizing same-sex marriage. Ante (1994) explains this application of an “essential definition of marriage”:

Court opinions have consistently cited this rationale for refusing to recognize a fundamental right for same-sex couples to be legally married. Beginning in 1971, when the Supreme Court of Minnesota ruled that same-sex couples have no legal right to marry because marriage is and always has been an inherently heterosexual institution, “a union of man and woman, uniquely involving the procreation and rearing of children,” courts in the United States have affirmed the idea that same-sex couples are precluded from marrying because of the nature of the institution of marriage itself (p. 2).

This essentialist view of marriage ignores historical evidence that the institution has changed dramatically and will continue to change to meet the needs of an evolving society. As Eskridge (1993) points out, “Traditional arguments against same-sex marriage [are] seriously defective: the definitional argument essentializing marriage around male-female

intimacy is factually wrong; the argument from Judeo-Christian tradition is hypocritical, given early Christianity's tolerance of same-sex intimacy" (cited in Ante, p. 4).

The changing role of procreation in marriage is another example of the responsiveness of the institution of marriage to evolving socio-economic conditions. Despite the claim by traditionalists that procreation is the central function of marriage, many male-female marriages do not produce children and no state identifies the ability to procreate as a prerequisite for obtaining a valid marriage license. Hohengarten (1994) notes, "Opposite-sex couples may marry without showing that they possess either the ability or the intention to have children" (p. 1502). The majority opinion in Baehr v. Lewin (1993) points out that the Hawaii legislature in 1984 amended the then existing prerequisite to a marriage license that "neither of the parties is impotent or physically incapable of entering into the marriage state," and in 1985 deleted as a ground for annulment the fact that "one of the parties was impotent or physically incapable of entering into the marriage state" (cited in Baehr v. Lewin, FN1, p. 658). The Baehr decision states, "The legislature's own actions thus belie the dissent's wholly unsupported declaration that 'the purpose of [marriage] is to promote and protect propagation' " (p. 658). An extensive examination of the legal connection between marriage and procreation conducted by Hohengarten (1994) concluded, "There is no basis in law for the assertion that the fundamental right to marry extends only to couples who are capable of biological procreation" (p. 1501). Marriage in the United States is already changing in response to world over-population, dwindling natural resources, and increasing economic competition.

### **Research on Gay and Lesbian Intimate Relationships**

A "relationship perspective" on homosexuality has been developed by Peplau and her colleagues (Peplau, Cochran, Rook & Padesky, 1978; Peplau, 1981; Peplau & Amaro, 1982; Peplau, 1983; Peplau, Padesky & Hamilton, 1983; Peplau & Cochran, 1990; Peplau, 1991). In a review article (1991), Peplau comments, "In the past, virtually all research on adult love relationships has focused on heterosexual dating and marriage" (p.

177). She notes that scientific research that provides factual descriptive data about lesbians, gay men, and our relationships “can inform the discussion of new legal and public policy issues that arise as gay men and lesbians become a more visible and vocal part of society” (p. 178).

Peplau (1991) notes that “social exchange theory” (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Gergen, 1977) has been one of the most influential theoretical perspectives on heterosexual relationships and may also inform research on homosexual relationships. In particular, exchange principles may be applied to the issue of commitment in homosexual relationships. Exchange principles postulate that commitment and permanence in relationships are due to two sets of factors. The first is the strength of positive attraction that make couples want to stay in the relationship. The second is barriers that make ending the relationship costly. Peplau (1991) speculates that marriage may serve as an important barrier to ending a relationship and thus contribute to the long-term stability of the relationship:

For heterosexuals, marriage usually creates many barriers to dissolution including the cost of divorce, the wife’s financial dependence on her husband, joint investments in property, concerns about children, and so on. Such factors may encourage married couples to “work” to improve a declining relationship, rather than end it. In contrast, gay and lesbian couples may be less likely to experience comparable barriers to the ending of a relationship – they cannot marry legally, their relatives may prefer that they end the relationship, they are less likely to have children in common, and so on (p. 188).

It may be that the relative ease with which gay and lesbian partners can enter and leave an intimate relationship contributes to shorter-term relationships, “despite the fact that studies...find that most gay men and lesbians say they very much want to have enduring close relationships (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Peplau & Cochran, 1990). The fact that legal

marriage is not available as a “barrier to dissolution” may be one of the intangible costs of prohibiting legal same-sex marriage. A study by Kurdek and Schmitt (1986) does show that married couples reported “significantly more barriers than either gays or lesbians....”(cited in Peplau, 1991, p. 188). Eskridge (1996), too, observes, “Ironically, the biggest cost of marriage provides the best reason why gays and lesbians should seek legal recognition of their right to marry: marriage is easy to enter but hard to exit..... Getting married signals a significantly higher level of commitment, in part because the law imposes much greater obligations on the couple and makes it much more of a bother and expense to break up” (p. 71).

The role of satisfaction in relationships also has potential relevance for the study of same-sex marriage. Duffy and Rusbult (1986) extended exchange theory principles to build an “investment model” to predict satisfaction and commitment in romantic relationships. The investment model predicts that commitment will be stronger (1) to the extent that a person is satisfied with the relationship; (2) to the degree that there are poor alternative partners; and (3) to the degree that persons have invested sizable resources in the relationship. In a comparison of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual relationships, they found for all types of relationships, higher levels of relationship commitment were significantly related to relationship satisfaction. This research suggests that marriage, which builds higher levels of commitment and stronger barriers to dissolution, may contribute to satisfaction in gay and lesbian marriages.

Kurdek’s (1994) programmatic research on relationship quality in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples suggests that “social support” is an important correlate of relationship satisfaction. Kurdek and Schmitt (1987) found that “married couples perceived more support from family members than did gay and lesbian couples” (cited in Kurdek, 1994, p. 135). In their study of American couples, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) report about one lesbian couple, “[Jill] feels that even though her family is supportive, they would be far more so if she would give them a son-in-law. Natalie wishes society approved more, but

she is accustomed to doing without much support, and therefore does not miss it as keenly as Jill does" (p. 492). Bridges and Croteau (1994) who examined the literature on "once-married lesbians" emphasized that "a major difference between a woman's heterosexual marriage and her lesbian relationship is lack of social validation" (p. 137). The wedding ceremony and the public status of marriage, a status which married couples constantly reference by using the terminology of "my husband" and "my wife", grant a level of social support to heterosexual couples that is unavailable to homosexual couples.

### **Research on Older Lesbians**

Studies of older lesbians are scarce in scientific literature. There is an increasing interest, however, in understanding the particular needs and viewpoints of aging lesbian women and gay men (Adelman, 1990; Bridges & Croteau, 1994; D'Augelli, 1995; Dunker, 1987; Friend, 1989; Friend, 1990; McDougell, 1993; Quam & Whitford, 1992; Raphael & Robinson, 1980; and Tully, 1989), but there are serious limitations in this literature. Quam and Whitford (1992) point out, "Only a handful of studies consist of samples comprised solely of older lesbians" (p. 367). The literature on aging lesbians is also limited by numerous methodological problems associated with sampling any homosexual population. These sampling problems have been identified by many researchers. First, there is bias inherent in sampling lesbian and gay men because willingness to participate in a study is dependent on some level of activity in the lesbian/gay community and/or some level of self-identification and willingness to be out to the researchers conducting the study. This excludes countless people who are, or would like to be, intimate with same-sex companions. Quam and Whitford (1992) note that the majority of research about homosexual populations focuses on younger, white, well-educated, and high socioeconomic status respondents. Even studies with large samples contain few people over 50 and even fewer over the age of 65. Deevey (1990) also observes, "The first federally-funded National Lesbian Health Care Survey (Ryan & Bradford, 1988) located a large and ethnically diverse sample of lesbian women, but only 10% of the 1,917

participants were older than age 45" (p. 37). Clearly, older lesbians warrant more study, both to counter negative stereotypes about aging and lesbianism, and to discover the strengths, wisdom and needs of lesbians who are growing old.

There is empirical evidence for an interesting phenomenon: a large number of lesbians have been previously married in heterosexual marriages. Bell and Weinberg (1978) noted that, "Several investigations have found that approximately 20 percent of homosexual men and even more lesbians have been married at least once" (p. 160). They found that 35 percent of their white lesbian sample (N=229) and 47 percent of their black lesbian sample (N= 64) had been previously married. Bridges and Croteau (1994) note that in a 4-year study of 201 lesbians in London, England conducted in 1980 by Ettore, 23.9 percent had been previously married. In Raphael and Robinson's (1980) interview-based study of 20 lesbians over age 50, five of the women had been in heterosexual marriages of 19-33 years, and 6 had short marriages of three weeks to three years (55%). In more recent studies with samples exclusively of older lesbians, the number of women who have been previously married also increases dramatically. Deevey (1990) found that 40 percent of her sample (N=78) of women over age 50 had at one time been married to a man. In Kehoe's study of lesbians over 60 (1984; cited in Deevey, 1990), 42 percent (N=100) had been previously married. Charbonneau and Lander (1991) interviewed 30 women who had spent half of their lives as heterosexual, married and as parents, and then in mid-life became lesbians (cited in Bridges and Croteau, 1994). This literature indicates that previously married lesbians are an important subgroup within lesbian populations, especially within older lesbian samples.

Lesbians who have been previously married and those who have never been in a heterosexual marriage are included in this study. Previously married lesbians may have a window of personal experience through which the exclusion of gay and lesbian people from legal marriage and its impact on lesbian intimate relationships stand out with particular clarity. Lesbians who have chosen not to enter a traditional marriage may also have

particularly clear insights about the meaning of marriage and same-sex marriage. Is the construct of marriage any more or less important to these two groups of informants? This study highlights some of the similarities and differences in the viewpoints reported by the older lesbians who participated in this research.

In her classic study of meaning and identity in old age, Sharon Kaufman (1986) observed that for one 80 year old woman, Millie, "Affective ties provide the central meaning in her experience. [Her] *marriages are the structure upon which she builds her life story*" (p. 41). From early in my own life, I remember struggling with a keen sense of *not* belonging at traditional heterosexual weddings. Much later in my life, with many years of life experience as a lesbian, I began to ponder the question, "*What are the consequences, in terms of meaning and identity, of not having the possibility of marriage as a structure upon which to build one's life story or to dream about one's life?*" It is this question, so deeply relevant to my own life, and to the lives of lesbians and gays in general, that has been the catalyst for this research. Hopefully, what I have discovered in this research will contribute to a more enlightened and more respectful view of lesbian and gay people, framed as we are in a culture and historical period which continues to severely limit our participation in central social activities, such as marrying, constructing a family, and parenting children.

### **Research Questions**

Since same-sex marriage is not yet a historical reality and, as a consequence, lacks an existing empirical literature, hypothesis-driven research was not the appropriate approach. I began this exploratory research with the intention of answering the following set of questions:

- (1) How has heterosexual civil marriage affected the life of each informant?
- What marriage-related emotions, meanings, and experiences with heterosexual marriage are reported by each informant?



- (2) Were there particularly influential experiences or turning points that changed how the informant feels and thinks about heterosexual marriage and same-sex marriage?
- (3) What are the informant's views on the meaning and purpose of legal same-sex marriage?
- (4) What are informants' views on the impact that access to legal same-sex marriage would have on the quality of lesbian intimate relationships?
- (5) Does the informant view marriage as a basic civil right that should be accessible to all citizens? Is the informant aware of political efforts currently in the lesbian and gay community to obtain legal recognition of same-sex marriage? If so, how does the informant view this effort?
- (6) Is there an observable difference in the interview content reported by previously married lesbians and that reported by never-married lesbians?

My research strategy focused on the points-of-view reported by the informants, who are "insiders" to the phenomenology of lesbian experience. I attempted to keep my own views from intruding on the auto-biographical accounts of the older lesbians I interviewed. When I began this research I truly did not know what emotions and experiences with marriage would be reported by the participants in my research sample, half of whom had been previously married in heterosexual marriages, and half of whom had never been in a heterosexual marriage. I had few expectations because I have never had the privilege of systematically listening to the voices of older lesbians. I knew little about the perspectives of older lesbians, a deprivation exacerbated by the almost complete absence of self-identified older lesbians in scientific research samples, i.e., their points-of-view are absent from the scientific domain. In contrast to this knowledge gap in scientific literature, the life-stories that have been collected in this research stand out as extraordinarily rich and moving accounts. It is my hope that the insights gained from

analysis of the data will serve as a foundation for more detailed research on lesbian and gay intimate relationships in reference to the construct of “marriage”.

### Research Strategy

This investigation was not intended to explain relationships among variables nor to test hypotheses in order to predict and control these variables. My goal was to use “life stories” collected from in-depth interviews as the empirical data from which hypotheses could be generated. This research goal requires an approach that I shall refer to as “constructionist,” as suggested by Kitzinger (1987) and Guba and Lincoln (1994).

The aims of research conducted within a constructionist framework (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) are consistent with my research goals:

- 1) I seek *context-rich data* with regard to the intersection between the individuals in my study and the social institution of marriage. My assumption is that marriage constitutes such a pervasive context, or implicit point of reference, within gay or straight social life that its influence on informants’ lives will be considerable.
- 2) I was interested in the *meanings* attached by informants to their life experiences with marriage. My assumption here is that what is “real” is exactly what each informant “constructs” as an interpretative, narrative account of her own life. I assume the validity of each informant’s story. As Kitzinger (1987) states in her study on the social construction of lesbianism, “My aim is not to reveal the ‘real’ histories, motives and life events of the informants, but to understand how people construct, negotiate and interpret their experience” (p. 71).
- 3) I was interested in the “*insider*” (*emic*) accounts of informants who have direct knowledge about the impact of marriage on their lives. From the vantage point of having lived a fairly long life, the older lesbians in this study could speculate as “insiders” about

the impact legal same-sex marriage might have on the quality of lesbian relationships. My assumption was that listening to the informants' detailed accounts would yield rich descriptive data about the role of marriage in lesbian lives and lesbian relationships.

4) I was interested in *insight, discovery and illumination* about the multiple meanings of marriage in lesbian lives and lesbian relationships. My assumption was that I could arrive at a deeper understanding of the costs (or benefits) that results from our exclusion from marriage, as well as of the benefits (or costs) that might result from our inclusion.

My goal was not to generalize results of this study to a larger population from which the sample came but rather to explore and discover characteristics of the phenomenon of interest – older lesbian views of “marriage” and “same-sex marriage.” This distinction between the “context of discovery” and “the context of verification” is well known in science. As Eisenhart (1990) has noted, “A methodology must be judged by how well it informs research purposes” (p. 4). An interview-based method of data collection, combined with the grounded theory method of data analysis, precisely “fit” my research goals.

Some assume that qualitative methodologies are easier to implement than quantitative methodologies, but fine qualitative research involving hands-on work with empirical data is a painstaking enterprise, one that requires sustained discipline and a certain passion to discover characteristics of the phenomenon of interest. The present project focused on an issue still virtually unexplored by social scientists and the appropriate first step is therefore a discovery-oriented effort to identify “what” exists with regard to this phenomenon, not “how much” exists (Steckler, McLeroy, Goodman, Bird, & McCormick, 1992; Reinharz, 1992; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Following this step, further studies can be designed to test research hypotheses with a variety of methods

## Method

### Informants

The informants were 10 self-identified older lesbians between 51 and 60 years of age, half of whom were previously married in heterosexual civil marriages (Group 1), and half of whom were never married in heterosexual civil marriages (Group 2). All 10 informants resided in Rhode Island or Massachusetts at the time they were interviewed. Seven informants were in long-term committed relationships with women at the time the interviews were conducted. Among the three informants without partners, one had lost her partner of 25 years from illness in 1996, another had lost her partner of 17 years from illness several years previous to this project, and the third had ended an 8 year relationship with a woman several years before this project. Given the geographical region for this research, Cape Verdeans and Portuguese Americans, along with federally defined minority groups, were identified as persons not in the majority culture.

Group 1 informants (Previously in HM) were in heterosexual marriages that lasted from 1 year to 29 years (1, 11, 17, 19, 29 years;  $M = 15.4$ ). Informants ranged in age from 51 to 60 years old ( $M = 54.2$ ). Four women in this group had children, and two were grandmothers. All five women had also been in or were currently in a long-term relationship with a woman partner of varying duration (2, 5, 7, 8, 17 years;  $M = 7.8$ ). One woman was African American, one was Portuguese American, and three were Northern European American with mixed ancestry (Irish, French, English, German, Polish).

Group 2 informants (Never in HM) ranged in age from 55 to 58 years old ( $M = 57.4$ ). No women in this group had children, and none were involved in co-parenting. All five women had also been in or were currently in a long-term relationship with a woman partner (6, 12, 17, 24, 25 years;  $M = 16.8$  years). Two women were African American, one was Portuguese American, and two were European American with mixed ancestry (Irish, French, English, German, Italian).

Informants were recruited through simple snowball sampling. An initial referral from one older lesbian permitted me to contact my first participant who referred me to other potential participants. I obtained each successive participant by referral from one interviewee to other acquaintances who might be willing to participate in the research project. To ensure the willingness of a potential participant to be contacted, I requested that my name and telephone number and the topic of the research be passed on to the potential participant. If the potential participant was interested, she either called me directly, or told the person who contacted her that her name and telephone could be given to me directly. During the first telephone contact we discussed the topic of my research and the process of informed consent. If the person consented to participate, we scheduled the first interview date and location.

The sample of 10 participants is obviously not representative of any population, nor was it intended to be. The concept of “representativeness” is linked to the “statistical sampling” techniques derived from probability theory so that distribution characteristics of a sample can be generalized to a population. Grounded theory data analysis uses “theoretical sampling” for the purpose of discovery and theory generation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To enhance the exploratory purpose of this research, diversity was sought and was achieved.

*Biographic profiles of all ten informants are presented in Appendix A. Please refer to these for more detailed, life-story information.*

### **Instrument**

In-depth interviews were conducted using a pre-tested, structured interview guide. Prior to the actual research project, three pre-test interviews were conducted with three volunteers to test and revise the research instrument. A copy of the final interview guide is available in Appendix B.

### **Procedure**

All interviews were tape-recorded with two tape-recorders and were conducted in the informant's private home ( $n = 7$ ) or at my home ( $n = 3$ ). Only two of the participants completed the entire interview in one session. Given the depth of the content elicited by the interview sessions, I found that it was preferable to conduct two interview sessions. Reinharz (1992) also encourages the use of multiple interviews in order to get corrective feedback, and to obtain responses that may have been omitted in a single interview session.

I began each interview with a discussion of informed consent, emphasizing the right to turn off the tape-recorder at any time, and the right to stop at any time. All informants signed two consent forms, one indicating consent to participate and the second indicating consent to audio recording (Appendix C). I asked a set of demographic questions (Appendix D) and then provided an explanation of key words I would be using in the interview, emphasizing that the subject of the research was marriage, as distinct from "domestic partnership." I made the following points at the outset:

- 1) Although the term "same-sex marriage" is employed in the interview, as a matter of "fact" legal same-sex marriages are not permitted in the United States;
- 2) The term "civil marriage" refers to a state-approved "heterosexual" marriage. The marriage license which confers legal status to heterosexual marriage is distinct from religious ritual and meaning that may or may not accompany a marriage ceremony;
- 3) Legal, civil marriage is distinct from "domestic partnership" which in some urban communities or corporate settings has been approved as a special status for committed "non-married" relationships. "Domestic partnership" is usually accompanied by a subset of the benefits that are conferred by a civil marriage license, for example, joint health insurance.

It was important to clarify that my research focus was not on domestic partnership, nor on the various religious meanings that may accompany wedding ceremonies or commitment ceremonies.

Following this introduction, I began the formal interview. Occasionally I took a few written notes to highlight a certain key comment or nonverbal communication as suggested by Guilbault (1992). I usually ended the first interview at about question #21 (37 questions total), and scheduled a return interview. At the end of the complete interview, I asked several validation questions:

- 1) Do you have anything you would like to add to this interview?
- 2) Can you think of any question I have left out that you would like to add?
- 3) Is there anything you have said that you would like to clarify further, or retract?
- 4) Do you have any frank feedback about the manner in which I conducted this interview and any suggestions at all about how I could improve the interview or be more sensitive to your needs during the interview?

All 10 participants responded that the interview was comprehensive, that I clearly had thought a lot about the questions, and that I had interacted with them in a manner that was sensitive and respectful. Several weeks after the interview was completed I made a follow-up phone-call to the informant to see if she had any further thoughts about the interview, and if she would like to clarify anything or retract any statement. Two informants added information and none retracted any statements. When the interview was complete, I concluded with a thank you card to the informant.

### **Transcription**

When each interview was finished, I turned the tape set over to a student transcriptionist who worked in my study on my computer and was fully instructed on the

complete confidentiality of the interview content. Each hour of interview material required about 3 hours for transcription, averaging 9 - 10 hours per interview. I followed this initial transcription with my own review of the audio tapes, and made corrections to the student transcription. This “cleaning process” required about 3 - 5 hours per interview.

At this point in the research process, I departed from the classic process of grounded theory research. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the grounded theory method is *not* conducted in a series of distinct phases which characterizes most social science research: (1) literature review, (2) obtain research sample, (3) collect data, (4) analyze data, and (4) write up and report results. In grounded theory, the process of data analysis begins immediately with the first set of empirical data, i.e., the first interview. Ideally, the grounded theory researcher analyzes the data *as it comes in* and uses this ongoing analysis to further develop the interview questions, as well as guide the sample selection. Glaser and Strauss refer to the grounded theory process as a “constant intermeshing of data collection and analysis” (1967, p. 73).

In the present investigation, I believed that one, unchanging interview guide for the entire sample of participants would provide the most useful initial information. Since I was not going to revise the interview guide *in process*, there was no need to analyze each data set for the purpose of further developing the instrument. Secondly, the constraints of an academic workload were congruent with conducting the data collection phase first, followed by data analysis in the summer of 1997, when time permitted the line-by-line coding that is the trademark of grounded theory research.

This initial project may be viewed as preparation for dissertation research, so I will be intermeshing data collection (this project), with data analysis (this project), followed by instrument revision, further data collection, and analysis at the dissertation stage. Given that this type of interview-based research is so time-consuming, it is simply not wise to under-utilize the research moment – one wants to ask the more refined questions that have emerged during the research process. Each interview requires a substantial investment of



time from data collection to complete analysis (30-40 hours / interview), making the conditions of such research quite unlike handing out a one hour survey to a classroom of college students. In dissertation research, if I continue to use grounded theory methodology, it is likely that I will attempt to analyze the data *as it comes in* and revise the research instrument continuously to maximize the research moment, as recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

### **Data Analysis**

After all the interviews were completed and transcribed into Microsoft Word files, I analyzed them using the method of “grounded theory data analysis” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Kaufman, 1986; Richie, 1994). Grounded theory analysis assumes that “in the description of their lives, people create *themes* – cognitive areas of meaning with symbolic force – which explain, unify, and give substance to their perceptions of who they are and how they see themselves participating in social life” (Kaufman, 1986, p. 25). Themes emerge from life stories as “the building blocks of identity” (p. 26). To identify key themes in each life story, I performed a series of analytic steps which may be described as a process of systematically *getting into the data*, followed by systematically *getting out of the data*.

The goal of grounded theory analysis is to reduce a large data set into a more parsimonious set of core themes or variables. If implemented properly, this reductionistic method generates a summary of core themes extracted from the empirical data. The steps of analysis include (1) line-by-line coding of each interview transcript; (2) grouping these codes into “themes” (also referred to as “core variables” or “categories”); (3) presenting these themes in an illustrative life-story summary selected from each group of interviews; (4) comparing the themes in Group 1 (Previously in HM) and Group 2 (Never in HM) data. This process is more carefully detailed in the next two sections.

### Getting into the Data

Working with one transcript at time, I began by reading each line of text, noting central points or indicator experiences reported by the informant. I placed “code marks” (consisting of abbreviated phrases or key passages from the text) in bold font in the middle axis of the page so that they stood out visually for textual review. With this transcript file open, I opened a second Microsoft Word file in which I recorded the “codes” from the source file. This second file contained the line-by-coding for each of thirty-seven interview questions, making it essentially an abbreviated replica of the original transcript. An example of a code file is included in Appendix E.

I then began to work directly with a hard-copy of the code file, examining the content of all thirty-seven questions for *core themes* which unify and further reduce the coded data into analytic groups. For example, for informant #1 (Renee), seven *core themes* appeared to unify and hold the data: 1) Fear and need for security, 2) Search for lesbian identity, 3) Attitudes toward heterosexual marriage (subset-importance of being a mother), 4) Turning points that influenced attitudes toward HM and same-sex marriage (subsets-hardship being lesbian; shame associated with being lesbian; experience of discrimination as divorced lesbian mother); 5) Attitudes toward same-sex marriage; and 6) Benefits and costs associated with legalizing same-sex-marriage.

Once I felt comfortable with the set of core themes, I selected color codes for each theme, and proceeded to color code the code file and the corresponding text in the original transcript. This step is basically a hands-on method for chunking data, similar to the statistical method of factor analysis which uses correlations to cluster data into *factors*, while grounded theory requires the researcher to use cognitive skills to conceptually group the data into *themes*. To further aid in the analysis and final write-up of research results, I constructed a set of index cards for each interview, with each core theme supported by exact quotes from the interview transcript. This step links the conceptually generated themes to indicator content in the empirical data. The themes should therefore not be

construed as cursory “impressions” of the data; they are grounded in and carefully linked to the actual data.

The final step in this process of fracturing of the data consisted of setting up three work tables that helped to further summarize and organize the data pieces. This set of three tables was created for each of the ten interviews. *Table 1* organized the data by the six research questions. For example, *taking the entire interview transcript into consideration*, all of the informant’s reports relevant to research question #1 (heterosexual marriage attitudes, experiences and emotions) were organized in one column. This organization of responses by research question was important because informants frequently articulated points relevant to a research question at different locations in the interview. *Table 1* permitted me to see selected, indicator data for a certain research question, a task that would be difficult or impossible reading a fifty page manuscript.

*Table 2* organized selected data by research question and by Group 1 (Previously in HM) and Group 2 (Never in HM) responses. This organization of the data permitted me to see the set of group responses per research question.

*Table 3* organized data for specific variables of interest to me, variables that were more specific than the broad research questions, or variables that I simply curious to see across the 10 informants. For each informant, these variables included 1) demographic data, 2) descriptions of parents’ marriage, 3) purpose of HM, 4) purpose of SSM, 5) the “marrying type,” 6) turning points, 8) conceptualization of current relationship as a “marriage,” 9) positive versus negative view of “marriage,” 10) the “price” of non-access to civil SSM, 11) civil right, and 12) abuse experience.

These steps together – line-by-line coding of original transcript, creating a code file, identifying core themes, color coding the transcript and code file, setting up index cards with indicator data, and creating the set of three work tables for each informant and/or each group (Group 1 and Group 2) – constituted the hands-on process of *getting into the data*. With immersion into the transcripts at saturation point, it was then possible to begin the

second half of the grounded theory analysis, which consists of getting out of the data and writing up findings.

### **Getting out of the Data**

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the process of “theoretical memoing” is central to getting out of the data. Stern (1980) describes memoing as “a method of preserving emerging hypotheses, analytic schemes, hunches, and abstractions” (p 23). Memoing is essentially a process of thinking or pondering about the data and the research process. It is for this reason that grounded theory is sometimes described as turning the normal strategy of a reflective person into a successful, systematic research strategy (Glaser & Strauss, p.7). For beginning researchers, the memoing process is often experienced as awkward, and I found this to be the case (Bowers, 1988). I began the process of memoing by writing thoughts about the data onto index cards, noting my questions or insights whenever they came to me, often during a walk. These memos focused primarily on the various “meanings” of marriage reported by each informant, along with methodologic struggles with grounded theory analysis, such as sifting through key variables and organizing core themes. Occasionally I would write down a specific insight or query about a specific informant’s life-story. Soon this memoing process began to merge with writing up the results presented here.

As I worked with the data and the core themes, I found that the six research questions originally presented in the Research Proposal could be refined into four research questions. Specifically, the three original research questions regarding “same-sex marriage” (#3-purpose/meaning of SSM, #4-impact of legal SSM, #5-view of SSM as civil right) could be simplified into a single research question that parallels the research question about heterosexual marriage. The question about SSM is then, “What attitudes, experiences and emotions associated with “same-sex marriage” are reported by the informant?” These four emergent research questions are:

- 1) What attitudes, experiences, and emotions linked to “heterosexual marriage” are reported by each informant?
- 2) Did influential experiences or turning points change the informant’s view of heterosexual marriage and “same-sex marriage”?
- 3) What attitudes, experiences, and emotions linked to “same-sex marriage” are reported by each informant?
- 4) Are there discernible patterns of difference or similarity between Group 1 (Previously in HM) data and Group 2 (Never in HM) data?

In the process of getting out of the data, it became apparent that the core themes extracted from each interview transcript, in fact, clustered around and could be mapped to these four research questions. While there were unique themes in the data – such as histories of childhood and marital abuse, the role of Christian values in one informant’s life-story, or the central role of friendship in another – these were not central to my purpose. In general, the textual data clustered into the themes that matched my research questions, a fact that an experienced grounded theory researcher might have anticipated. While it seems clear from this outcome that the research questions framed the scope of this investigation, it also underscores a virtue of grounded theory data analysis: the themes which were extracted from the data in a methodical analysis were truly “grounded” in the data, they *earned* their way into the final write-up by virtue of their relevance to the data. In grounded theory, no *a priori* variables are *assumed* to be present in the data. The method of grounded theory stays close to the data in order to produce small theories or modest conceptual organizations that “fit” the data.

Would another researcher discover a different thematic analysis than I propose here? Probably. With a data set that is as rich and textured as the one collected for this project, there are invariably many ways to slice the data. In my view, all analytic, knowledge-seeking methods that attempt to represent “nature” operate much like the beam of a lighthouse at night, illuminating what is brought into view, leaving the rest in

darkness. My goal with the analytic approach I have chosen has been to preserve as much as possible the distinctive points-of-view of the informants themselves. It is their experience within the cultural institution of marriage and its marginal counterpart, same-sex marriage, that I attempt to bring into view, and into the scientific domain.

## **Results and Discussion**

I begin by summarizing one life-story selected from each group of informants. I have selected these two stories for presentation because they broadly capture and serve to illustrate the core themes in the data. Laurie's story is a good exemplar of the themes in Group 1 (Previously in HM), and Janice's story is a good exemplar of the themes in Group 2 (Never in HM). Laurie and Janice are also matched on ethnicity, both identifying as Portuguese American, and this serves to highlight some of the similarities and differences in their stories. The selection of two stories for illustration and analytic purposes was difficult because all of the stories are compelling and rich. Each informant in this research reports thoughtful, provocative insights into her life experiences as a lesbian. Unfortunately, I must leave out of this report much of the actual interview content I have collected, although I attempt to capture the data as fully as possible through the two summarized stories, core themes, and within-group and between-group similarities and differences. Biographic profiles of each informant are provided in Appendix A. These can be referred to for more detailed information about each woman who participated in this research. It is also true that because I have been the privileged recipient of all the stories in their entirety, I have learned more about the lives of the older lesbians in my sample than is represented within the analytic framework of this thesis.

In another context, unconstrained by time and size limitations of academic research, I could present all ten stories in detail. I could also present different pairs of informants for illustrative purposes, such as matching the stories of two African American women, one

married for eleven years whose political activism and feminist values provided a foundation of strength for escaping an abusive husband, the other who never married, never wanted children, and views the traditional institution of marriage – the “all American Dream” – with pronounced skepticism. Similarly, I could present stories by two European American informants, one married and guided from early life by strongly held Christian values, the other never married and guided by strongly held feminist values. And similarly, the story of one informant who experienced a sense of “belonging” for the first time in her life when she publicly committed herself to her lover in front of a large assembly of friends could be presented with the informant who reports, “I would take a pill if there was one to be straight, because it is so hard to be lesbian.” The point is that *each* story I have collected is vivid and powerful – each evokes the complexity and dignity of the human agent who works with the circumstances she is contexted in to create a meaningful and authentic life.

I have organized the two illustrative stories that follow around the four research questions and the emergent themes in the textual data that correspond to these questions. As specified previously, the research questions include: 1) HM attitudes, experiences, emotions; 2) turning points; 3) SSM attitudes, experiences, emotions; and 4) with-in group comparisons. Again, I emphasize that neither the stories I have selected as exemplars of the common themes in this data set, nor the entire set of stories, are intended to reflect the universe of experiences of older lesbians with women lovers; they serve to mark only what *is* possible in the terrain of lesbian lives

## Group 1

### Laurie's Story

Laurie is a 52 year old Portuguese American lesbian who describes herself as lesbian her entire life – although she didn't know what the word “lesbian” was until after college. Laurie grew up in a family she describes as “one hundred percent Portuguese” with two parents who had a difficult, but enduring marriage. Laurie's early religious

training was Catholic and she now describes herself as Christian with strong beliefs in God and a strong regard for spirituality in her life. *Her marriage of 29 years is the longest of all marriages reported in this study – she married at age 21 and finalized her divorce in 1994 at age 50.* She and her former husband are devoted to their two children and they continue to enjoy family holidays together even after the divorce. Laurie reports enjoying wedding ceremonies and she recently delighted in her son's wedding to his high school sweetheart. For Laurie, her son's wedding marked the passage into a new generation being created, as well as a transition in her duties as a mother, which from this point onward would have a new aspect for both herself and her son. Her daughter was planning her wedding for 1997 when this interview took place. Both of her children respected Laurie's wish that they wait until age 25 to marry. Laurie explained to her children, "At this point you have enough wisdom in your life to make this decision and you know you have my blessings certainly." Laurie's eyes light up with obvious pride and delight when discussing her children, and a query about grandchildren brings a quick smile, "Not yet!"

Laurie met her husband-to-be while she was in college. They were friends for almost four years and he was "like a buddy" to her prior to their dating relationship. Laurie says, "I cared about him, I respected him, I had fun with him, and I could sit and talk with him." Laurie emphasizes that the quality of "friendship" has characterized her relationship with Keith from the beginning, and still does. She says, "It was not a romance. You have got to understand, it was not a romance. We were friends. Like two equals who liked talking to each other. We did dating, but we would go on a picnic and talk about issues. It wasn't like you see kids dating today, it wasn't like my daughter dating her boyfriend. We were two friends." Laurie explains that this level of comfort and friendship with Keith "was probably the only way I would have married."

Most importantly, this "friendship" quality contributed to Laurie's sense of "safety" with Keith. She explains, "I felt safe with him. I had feelings of safety ..... We both had a bit of emotional distance." Fear was a very strong emotion for Laurie when she began her



college dating relationship with Keith at about age twenty. She links her fear, and the intensity of this fear, to two disturbing experiences. First, she reports, "I was raped at age 10, and I think that created fear in the marriage situation....I have worked that through, but that situation really caused me a lot of harm. More than I ever thought [previous to counseling], and it still does. When you are violently treated I think it causes a lot of harm, a lot of scars." Although Laurie does not provide further details about this early traumatic experience, she explains, "I was afraid, very afraid to get involved in the marriage." Keith was not pushy in any way and this fact was essential to Laurie's final choice to marry him – "It was just fortunate for me that I did meet a man who was very gentle. I don't think I could have gotten through the marriage if he was not as gentle as he is."

The second experience that powerfully influenced Laurie's life course decisions occurred when she was 18 years old, three years prior to her marriage to Keith (at age 21). The first romantic love of her life was a woman – her college roommate, with whom she had a completely passionate and sexual relationship, conducted in secrecy and in the privacy of their dorm room at the small, southern, Christian university she attended. One day, Laurie was ordered to the Dean's office. At this point in the interview, Laurie's eyes darkened as she related the following events: "While I was talking with the Dean, they were literally moving my things out of my dorm room to another dorm across campus.....At the conclusion of the conversation the Dean told me, 'You will not see Jane again. If you do so you will be expelled.'" Laurie was humiliated and devastated by this experience, "I thought I did something like commit the biggest mortal sin. I lost 10 pounds the first week, any food I ate I threw up. I couldn't even talk with Jane, I couldn't even conclude. She was my first love."

Laurie acknowledges that she was not honest about this experience when she began to date Keith – "He would have looked at me cross-eyed." Laurie explains that she married Keith because she respected him, and because "I think that I also was proving to myself that I was not lesbian. I did not want to be lesbian, although I didn't actually know this

word at the time... I saw that it was not good to be a lesbian, that you would be punished. I saw that and I experienced that.”

Although Laurie entered into the marriage with some ambivalence – she called off the wedding once – and did not disclose her prior lesbian relationship, the marriage became a very positive partnership that contributed to Laurie's self-concept and self-worth. She reports that the marriage brought out positive strengths in both herself and Keith – “Our marriage brought out a very lot of positive things because of Keith’s respect for me. I was not the meek person I was prior to that when I was going to get thrown out of college.” And the core of the marriage for Laurie was giving birth and mothering her two children – her daughter, and her son. Laurie emphasizes that the central purpose and meaning in her marriage was having children, “*The reason I got married was that I did want to have children, and I felt the only way I could do that was through marriage..... You have got to remember that the intent of getting married was to have children.*” Laurie describes the birth of her first born daughter as “a miracle,” followed a few years later by her son. The birth of her children was a turning point in Laurie's life and as a result of the joys of parenting along with Keith’s “day-to-day considerations,” she became deeply committed to her marriage, affirming in her own mind, “Gee, I like the state of married life. I would like to maintain my marriage status.”

For Laurie, children, family and parenting are the treasures of her twenty-nine year marriage. She especially values what she has learned from the experience of mothering. She explains, “You learn a lot being a parent. You mature a lot. Children have their way of also making a parent grow up. They have their way of showing a parent that the commitment to a child is a very strong commitment.” She attributes her emotional flexibility and strength of character to her experiences with her children, and to the honesty with which children express themselves. Laurie emphasizes that mothering has taught her a great deal about “how to give and not expect in return,” and she contrasts this with the “self-centeredness” of many lesbians without children who have never learned this essential

art of giving and sharing. She views lesbians who have never parented as frequently lacking the depth of character cultivated by motherhood. In Laurie's story, her devotion to her children contributed to the longevity of her marriage and she insists, "I would not want to have gone through my life without them."

While parenting and caring for her family with great devotion, values that appear to be important in Portuguese American culture, Laurie also developed a successful small business which her two children now help manage. Laurie reports that her husband consistently supported her professional growth, and simultaneously respected the autonomy of her business life – it was her show. Looking back over her marriage of twenty nine years, Laurie concludes that her marriage contributed to making her a stronger person than she was when she entered it at age twenty-one:

We all have our own path in life. My marriage to Keith was exactly what I was supposed to do.....Whatever I was supposed to serve for him apparently I did. Whatever Keith was supposed to do for me apparently he did. We are both healthy, successful people. He is very successful in what he is doing in his life. I feel that I am successful in what I am doing in my own life. So whatever we were supposed to feed each other, apparently we fed. We didn't die, we grew.

However, despite the obvious strengths of this marriage, there is a more private and emotionally troubled side to this exceptional partnership, a point-of-view that Laurie reported with some difficulty.

It is interesting to note here that Laurie is one of three informants who added important content after the interview, during a follow-up telephone conversation. I originally interviewed Laurie in one intensive session that lasted about five hours, with a tea and sandwich break. At the end of this interview, I had a strong impression that there was more to Laurie's fascinating story than I had heard, although she had articulately and generously shared a great deal about her marriage, her children, and her experience of

sexual fulfillment and joy with women. Still, I left her home with a distinct feeling that something was hidden and unclear to me. Perhaps it was the way her face shifted from relaxed warmth and laughter to heavily creased lines, or the way her eyes shifted from luminous brown when speaking about her pleasure with women to dark obsidian when hinting at a struggle that was hard to put into words. She was very complex to me, such a successful woman, yet visibly marked by her life experiences. *Both* her twenty-nine year heterosexual marriage and her love for women were core to this woman's identity. Seven days after the interview, Laurie called me and said, *"I left out some details when talking with you, I left out telling you what a terrible struggle it was for me to leave my marriage, to go out and be myself as a lesbian. It was not just that I needed to be sexual with women, although that was important. It was more than that."* The account that followed pulled together the depth and intensity of Laurie's struggle to live authentically as her lesbian self. Through the post-interview telephone conversation, I began to understand more clearly that Laurie's quest for congruence with her sexual identity dominated her adult development from the moment she was threatened with expulsion from her Christian university. This quest to find a path to actualizing her lesbian identity became increasingly urgent as her marriage progressed. In year 15 of her marriage, she realized that she had to be herself as the lesbian she was, or "self-destruct."

The gestalt of this sexual identity quest is a complex one. Laurie had informed me at the beginning of the interview session that even though she was now divorced (in 1994) she still loved her ex-husband. However, she immediately qualified this statement, "It's a different form of love than I would have for a woman. It's a very different form of love, it develops out of respect, compatibility and being friends. For some reason the love seems to be deeper with a woman. I wish my love for my ex-husband could be that deep because he is a nice man, a good man, but I can't love him that way, I just can't."

The issue of sexual fulfillment was an important catalyst for her long search to return to a woman lover, although her quest for intimacy with women involved more than

just sexual needs. She reports that while she could talk with Keith, felt comfortable and completely “safe” with him, she “could not make love to him in a sexual way.” She explains, “I had a terrible time with that. We didn’t make love on our honeymoon at all. I couldn’t do it. I always found some excuse. I thought, ‘What am I gonna do? What am I gonna do?’ I didn’t know what to do.” She did not have intercourse with him until three months into her marriage, when she became immediately pregnant with her daughter. Laurie was extremely troubled about the difficulty she experienced being sexual with Keith. She reports, “I kept rejecting him and I think that I gave in for his pleasure, his happiness. Because like I said, he was a very good person.....I didn’t know what my problem was. I really didn’t know.”

In this marriage that was exceptional on many counts, the one thing Laurie did not feel good about “was just having the sex.” This was the single biggest thing that Laurie did not like about the marriage, she referred to it as “the key here.” Laurie has done a great deal of thinking about the sexual aspect of her relationship with Keith and how this contrasts with her experience of lesbian sexuality. Laurie explains, “I have met (lesbian) women who have enjoyed the sexual relationship with their former husband, and then enjoyed sex with the women they were with.” For Laurie, this dual sexuality was not the case. “In making love to a woman I can give myself, and in making love to a man I cannot give myself. I’m holding back. It’s just different.”

For Laurie, the sexuality she experiences with women is uniquely characterized by qualities that transcend the purely sexual. Her eyes and face sparkle with delight when she describes the intangible, spiritual quality of her love-making with women. Her need for this “spirituality within sexuality” is why she insisted in her follow-up phone call that she left her marriage “for more than just sexual needs.”

I don’t know what it is but I know that I can’t get to the level of intimacy and gut feeling and joy that I feel with a woman, that I cannot feel that with a man. No matter, even if he were a perfect man whom

you respect and you can appreciate. It's just not the same....Let's put it this way – there is a spiritual connection somehow, because it is with your spirit that you are attracted to the other person. It's a spiritual, intangible thing. That connection is there.

In Laurie's view, this quality of connection is deeper than passion or the “lust factor.” “Deep sexuality is spiritual, emotional, you allow someone to come inside of you deeply.” She views her need for “spirituality within sexuality” as essential to her lesbian self-conception, a view which predictably impacted on her marriage with Keith. She explains, “Being a lesbian had a tremendous impact on my marriage.....There was an absence of intense joy because the creativity that goes on in lovemaking and the romancing was not there.....In a lesbian relationship that creativity is there, I know this. So the marriage didn't feed the spirit.”

The importance of “feeding the spirit” cannot be overstated for Laurie. In her view, it is only when this intangible, spiritual core of being is nourished that one develops the highest levels of motivation to live and to give to life. She explains, “You see Keith and I were happy, and there was a level of contentment. But it is different when the whole world opens up to you. When you are spiritually nourished (through sexuality and being-in-love), you can move further. And you have more compassion for other people.” Interestingly, Laurie's college motto was “The Spirit makes the master.” It seems that her connection with “the Spirit” was fractured when the college Dean so thoroughly insulted her lesbian identity and lesbian love relationship.

Throughout the first fifteen years of her marriage, Laurie explains that longing for women came on her like a wave, “I would be fine for a while and then it would hit me again.” Her frustration became so painful that she began having real emotional blackouts. It is this period of her life that she told me about in greater detail in the telephone conversation after the interview session. “I would drive somewhere and not remember driving there, and not know where I was. This was a very tough time for me. I had

feelings for women, but I was trying NOT to act on them. It was a very very difficult time.” In the fifteenth year of marriage, the strain of repressing her lesbian identity become too much and Laurie finally went to a therapist for the first time in her life. She describes herself at this time as “borderline institutionalized.” Fortunately, she teamed up with an outstanding counseling center. After a battery of tests ruled out organic disorder, Laurie's counselor, with the assistance of an experienced supervisor, supported her in a process of *recovering* her lesbian identity.

Laurie speaks emphatically about the pain that both she and her ex-husband went through as a result of society's prohibition against homosexuality. She explains, “Women must be who they are. I was *trying* to be heterosexual. Most women do not *try* to be heterosexual.....I tried to live in the heterosexual world, but I *never* felt it was me. I was happy [in my marriage] but there still was this emptiness and a lack of completeness within myself.” She is philosophic about the necessity of living one's authentic sexual identity:

No-one can convince me that if you are homosexual you can change.

You can change on the surface, but you cannot inside. It would be the same if you put two heterosexual women together and said, “You have to make love together.” They would feel this is absurd. I felt I was being forced to be heterosexual. The pain I went through, and my ex-husband went through, was a result of me “going against my grain.” *If someone told me to shoot my dog, I could not do it, it would be against my grain. Similarly, being heterosexual for me is against my grain.*

*When you go against your grain, there is damage.*

When Laurie came out as a lesbian to herself and to her husband in the fifteenth year of marriage, her husband strongly favored keeping their marriage together. From this time on they slept in separate beds and, in fact, were never together again sexually. As soon as one child moved out, Keith moved into the available bedroom. During the last fifteen years of marriage, to Laurie's knowledge, Keith never developed a sexual or love relationship with

another woman. According to the terms of their agreement, Laurie began to socialize in the lesbian community, soon meeting and falling in love with a woman who became her lover for eight year years. This lesbian relationship was conducted in the privacy of her lover's home and with Keith's full knowledge. While the marriage was able to last another fourteen years with this arrangement, in Laurie's view the marriage had become a "false marriage – what looked like a marriage but was not a marriage."

As Laurie approached the age of fifty, the prospect of retiring with Keith and living into old age with him prompted her at last to move for divorce, "I thought, I can't go this route. I can't do it. It is too false." Once again, Laurie entered therapy, this time at year twenty-nine of the marriage, and this time with a lesbian psychotherapist. Laurie had to push for the divorce, and she credits counseling with keeping her on track as she gently informed Keith, "It's time for us to change." The divorce was accomplished with their friendship intact. Laurie explains with a soft, textured voice, "I began to live my life as who I am, for me. I began to honor who I am. That is a very important lesson I learned in counseling." At age 50 Laurie embarked on a new stage in her life. She sees the world from a very different place now, "because I am more and more who I am. I am content with being myself."

Laurie's life experience informs her attitudes about same-sex marriage – there is no question in her mind that same-sex marriage is a civil right. She says, "Same-sex marriage will happen, I have no doubt. People will realize that homosexuals are sincere in their pursuit of same-gender love." Laurie is active in the older lesbian community, and currently dating a woman with children whom she likes very much. Laurie definitely views herself as a "marrying type of person," who needs a stable and committed relationship with one partner. While having children was the central purpose of her heterosexual marriage, Laurie now feels that because she is moving into old age, same-sex marriage is important to her for "security and insurance reasons." She is keenly aware of the legal and economic benefits attached to civil marriage and would like these to be



available to her if and when she chooses to marry a woman partner. Laurie believes that there is no need to alter the structure of legal obligations and benefits linked to civil marriage for same-sex marriage – “the rules should be the same.” She would be motivated to marry a woman for the same reasons she was motivated to marry Keith – most importantly, experiencing a sense of safety, trust, respect, comfort, fun, and good communication with her partner. She also places a high value on “being creatively romantic” with women in a way she could not be with her former husband.

Although legalization of same-sex marriage would not impact how Laurie feels about herself *at this point in her life*, it would “validate the lesbian and gay community.” If same-sex marriage were legalized, it would be “more commonplace to see same-sex couples openly owning homes together, raising children, cutting their lawns, wanting to live a fulfilled life – in short, being human just like everybody else.” The increased visibility of married homosexual couples and the improved status conferred by marriage rights would also prompt greater acceptance by heterosexually-identified observers. While Laurie sees *no disadvantages* to permitting legal same-sex marriage, one important advantage is that marriage may prompt same-sex couples “to make a more serious commitment rather than just a temporary commitment to each other.” Laurie ponders this potential consequence of legal same-sex marriage:

It’s very easy for our people to get in and out of the relationship and maybe they don’t look at it as seriously as maybe they should. Then maybe there would be less turnover in the relationship commitment area. This in turn would add some stability to the community, hopefully. Maybe couples would have children, and we could all share in those stabilities.

At the same time, Laurie believes that same-sex marriages would have the same problems that heterosexual marriages struggle with, such as infidelity, but in general, legalizing same-sex marriage would be a stabilizing force. She pointed out that the issue of tolerance

and equal rights for stigmatized groups is an old issue in this country, which has consistently been resolved in the direction of civil equality for the groups in question – African Americans, various immigrant populations, and women. She argues that society and laws must move toward equal rights for gays and lesbians in order to protect the “good in society.” She concludes, “Gays and lesbians have a constitutional right to marriage.... It will happen and I believe it will happen in my lifetime.”

As the interview approached the end, I asked Laurie a question that produced strong responses from eight of the ten informants – “Do you feel you have paid a price for not being able to consider legally marrying your woman lover?” (question #36). Laurie burst out in reply:

There is no question in my mind that I have paid a price because I think any time you are not allowed to be free you pay a price. You pay an emotional price, you pay a price in even your own progress and personal development and health. I have learned that if you can't be yourself and exercise who you are, you pay a price.... I think when they don't acknowledge gay and lesbian marriages, when they say that you can't get married, it's just like when the school told me that they were gonna expel me, it's the same thing. They are saying, “You can't do this. It's wrong.” It has hurt me. If when I was in college, lesbians could be married I would have understood what a lesbian was.... But I never heard anything about lesbians. I never even heard the word mentioned. It was like if you mentioned the word it was like saying the f word. [If same-sex marriage were legal] I probably would have fantasized about marrying a woman. There would have been no question that I would have done that. There is no question. If I knew that it was okay back then, then I would have probably looked to marry a woman. There's no question.

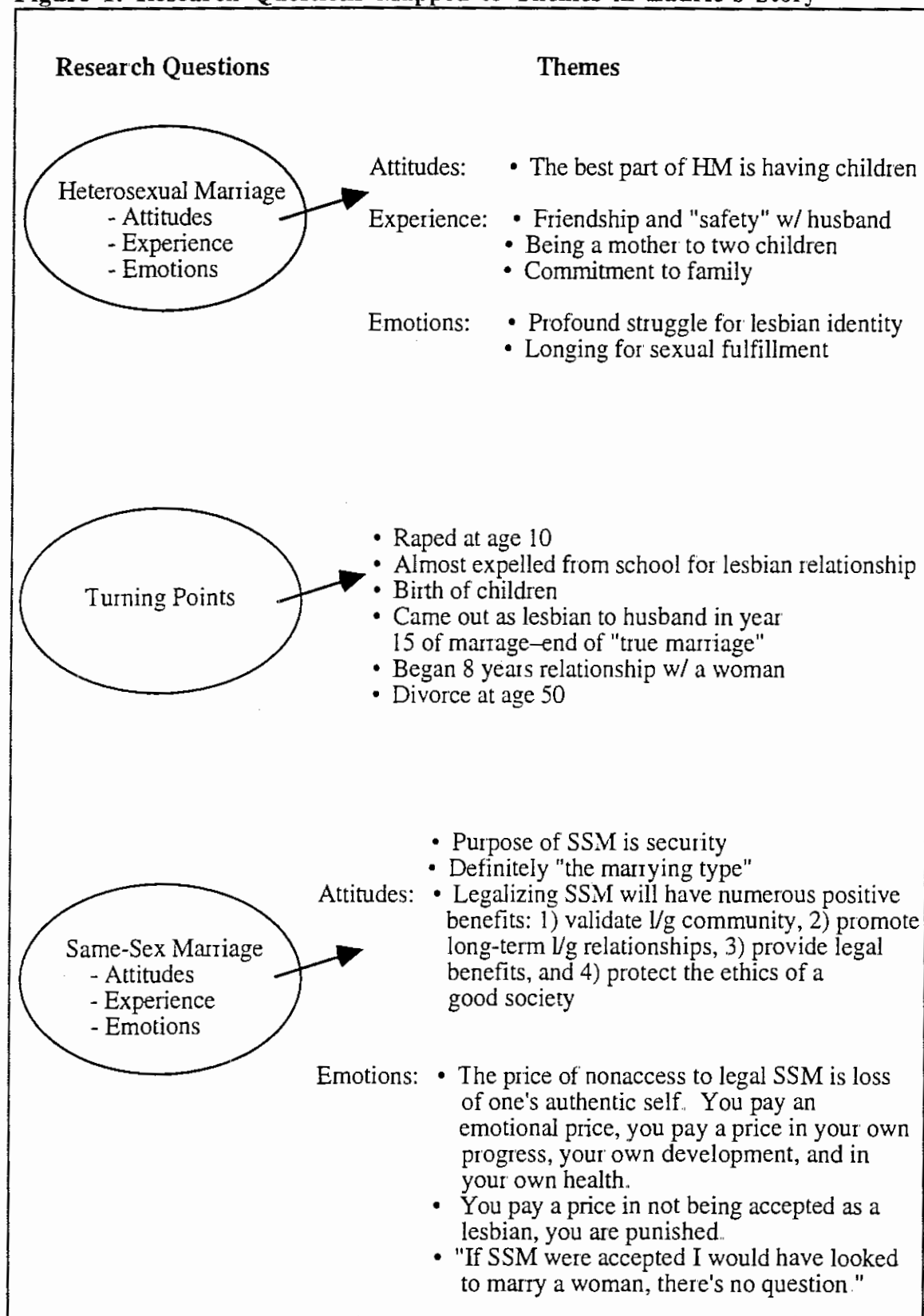
Clearly, for Laurie (and for most of the informants in this study), there was a large price attached to the cultural prohibition against homosexuality, a prohibition linked inextricably to denying legal status – and possibility – to a same-sex union. What is remarkable in Laurie's life-story is that she succeeded in coming full circle after being nearly expelled from college, becoming lesbian in a Portuguese, anti-gay Catholic culture while maintaining her deep attachments and commitments to a very good man and two dearly loved children. It seems to be the case that this need to live with a sense of authentic identity, including sexual orientation identity, has quite startling power to shape a human life. In the end, she says she had no choice but to go forward, "I had to go out and be myself as a lesbian, or self-destruct. I went through a struggle, a terrible struggle, to be who I am as a lesbian."

### **Research questions and themes in Laurie's story**

The data in Laurie's story can now be mapped to the first three research questions that guided the research effort, as illustrated in *Figure 1* below. In *Figure 1*, the specific, ideographic content – the core themes – in Laurie's story cluster around each question: 1) HM attitudes, emotions, experiences; 2) Turning points; and 3) SSM attitudes, emotions, experiences.

(see next page for *Figure 1*)

Figure 1: Research Questions Mapped to Themes in Laurie's Story

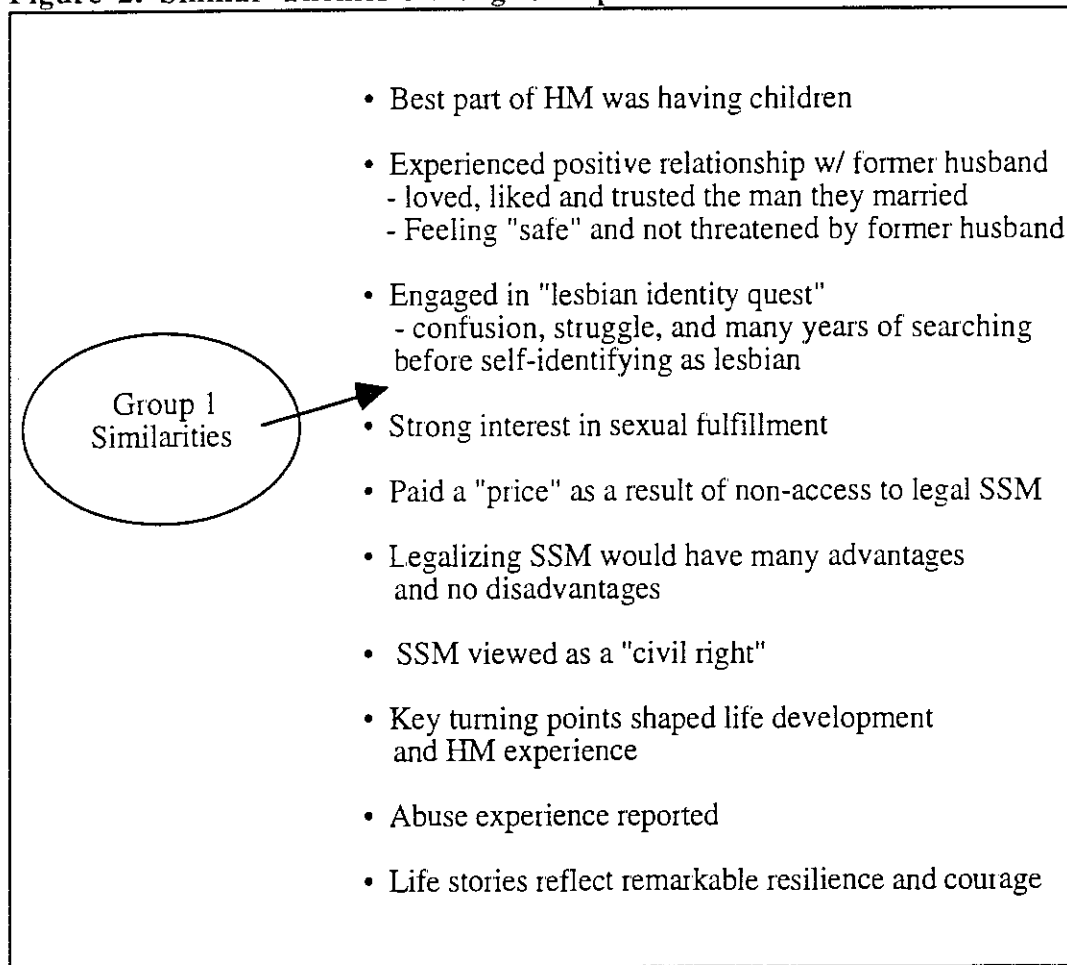


## Group 1 Comparisons

### Similarities among Group 1 informants

The themes in Laurie's story are specific to her life experience, and I will not at this point further comment on them. I will now bring Group 1 data as a whole into view by identifying key similarities and differences in these five stories. Patterns in the data are not assumed to be generalizable given the small sample size, and while these themes emerge from the data, they reflect my own conceptual organization. This does not diminish the importance of the themes since the goal of this project is to mark "what" exists in the terrain of lesbian lives, using the investigative "window" provided by grounded theory methodology. Key *similarities* are shown in *Figure 2* below:

**Figure 2: Similar Themes Among Group 1 Informants**



In order to illustrate the relationship between the common themes and the textual data, I have constructed a series of tables containing exact actual textual indicators that “ground” each theme. This serves to emphasize an essential characteristic of grounded theory analysis, i.e., the emergent themes are empirically supported by the data. I have constructed six tables detailing data for the first six themes in *Table 1*: 1) Best part of HM, 2) Positive relationship with husband, 3) Lesbian identity quest, 4) Sexual fulfillment as a concern, 5) Paid a “price” as a result of non-access to legal SSM, and 6) Impact of legalizing SSM viewed as entirely advantageous. I have not constructed tables with textual data for the last four shared themes: 7) SSM viewed as a civil right, 8) Reports of abuse, 9) Turning points in life development, and 10) Evidence of remarkable courage and resilience because these are fairly straight-forward “facts” that are not particularly elucidated by further textual documentation.

(next page)

Table 1: The Best Part of HM is Having Children

Informant	Group 1 - Textual Data
#1 - Renee	If you have children you learn to nurture...The most vivid experience in my marriage was the family thing. I <i>loved</i> the family thing [emphatic]...I am further ahead than lesbians who have never married or had children. They missed out on the children. They have no family when they get old.
#2 - Ingrid	Married one year, did not have children (although she married to have children).
#4 - Katie	Married for love and to have children - This is what God wants us to do, get married, procreate, and live together forever.....The best that my HM brought out in me was becoming a mother. I always wanted to know what it was like to give birth. All of my children were natural births, and it was always a miracle to me. As each child grew it was a wonder to me .....I loved every minute of it. The children to me were the best thing that came out of the marriage. That was the apex of the marriage, having children.....Being a mother – that is very powerful.
#5 - Laurie	I never ever regretted having children. Children teach you so much because they are so honest. It is a growing experience to have children. You miss something if you do not have children...You learn so much being a parent. You mature.... You have to remember, the intent of getting married was to have children.....When I gave birth to my daughter I felt like it was a miracle
#9 - Angie	The most vivid experiences in my marriage (if I block out the abuse) was when my son was born. The miracle of birth...its just an amazing thing. I think if there is one thing that stands out, the one thing I remember was seeing my son being born and seeing him now as a young man. Watching him grow. We were bonded right away in the beginning. That is the one point in marriage that stands out. For me he was the best part of my marriage.

(next page)

**Table 2: Positive Relationship with Former Husband**

Informant	Group 1 - Textual Data
#1 - Renee	My husband wasn't a threat at all, he wasn't forceful. He was a <i>nice</i> person [emphatic].....He didn't pressure me for sex. He wasn't aggressive. I felt safe with him. I trusted him.....We are still friends, good friends. I felt like we were more friends than husband and wife.
#2 - Ingrid	(Married one year) He was interested only in himself. A few incidents just made me know that it was impossible to even think about having children in this context.....It took me by surprise that he was so domineering when he had not been that way before marrying. I knew it wasn't right, it didn't take me long to know I could <i>never</i> do this to a child[emphatic]. He was also drinking. I filed for divorce.
#4 - Katie	I was very happy with Bill. He was NOT pushy, he was a very very loving man. He was very nurturing, he gave me all that I did not have from my mother and father. We really enjoyed each other. I really enjoyed him and trusted him. He became my comforter, my lover, my everything.....Then he had a sickness (alcoholism). He's not the man I married (divorced after 19 years).
#5 - Laurie	Even though I am divorced, I still love my husband, but it is different than the love I have for a woman..... He is a nice man, a good man [emphatic] I respected him.....I cared about him, I had fun with him.....We were friends, like buddies.....He was not pushy with me in any way. I felt safe with him.....It was not a romance. We were friends, like two equals.
#9 - Angie	I began to suffer abuse when my son was 2 or 3...it steadily worsened. Husband had a gambling habit. I have a 20% hearing loss from one beating.....He demanded sex after beating me up.....I was afraid of him.....It took me 10 years to get over that (divorced after 11 years).

(next page)



**Table 3: Lesbian Identity Quest**

Informant	Group 1 - Textual Data
#1 - Renee	<p>When I was working in a factory I dated guys, but there was a girl I worked with I really liked. I would go out on dates just because she was there. But I didn't know what any of that was. I probably knew, but she didn't encourage me. If she had encouraged things I think everything would have been different, and I would have never gotten married. That's probably the whole answer to all of my 17 years of marriage.</p> <p>After my third child I started getting real strong feelings of attraction to women. I became this brave person all of a sudden. I had several affairs with lesbian women. Then I realized I must love women, but I am still confused because I am married and Nadine has such a wonderful husband. I was still struggling with who I was. I was just so confused. Then I met Janet. I realized I really loved her and wanted to be with her, but I didn't know how to get out of my marriage. I gave up everything for Janet. It was just so painful leaving my kids (crying). If I had a choice I would be heterosexual because you are FREE. In gay life, you are not free. My heart led me to being lesbian, as hard as it is, I cannot go back now.</p>
#2 - Ingrid	<p>When my college girlfriend married, it was very confusing for me. I felt abandoned, like a jealous lover. I did not understand that, it was very very difficult, I had no words. It wasn't like I knew women should be together. I want on my honeymoon to Provincetown. Did I catch this on a conscious level? No. I knew I didn't belong in that married place, but I couldn't be in a lesbian place either. I couldn't get out of the wedding. I didn't know what else to do. When I sang at weddings there was something that made me feel I did not belong. I could not understand why I had this feeling. I had such deep feelings of loneliness and feeling that I did not belong anywhere. My husband belittled my artwork...there was alienation all around me.</p>

(Table 3 continued)

Table 3 (cont.): Lesbian Identity Quest

Informant	Textual Data
#4 - Katie	<p>Looking back, I would not have married. I was about to leave my parents house before I met my husband to be. He caught me at the right moment in my life when I was really needing to make a transition. When I look back on it I was still a lesbian deep down inside, but I was doing what society wants us to do-marry, have a family, live happily ever after. But deep inside of me I wasn't doing what I really wanted to do.</p> <p>I was in love since childhood with my lifelong soulmate, Christine. My lesbian sexuality was always repressed. When I was growing up there were no models. There was no place for me to express my lesbian sexuality...I always thought I was lesbian, I always knew I was a lesbian. I just knew it. Down inside...I didn't have language. I didn't know how to express myself. I would try to find books about women lovers.</p> <p>Before I was married I went to gay bars in Boston...it excited me but I couldn't quite understand it. I didn't want to get involved with the black leather dykes. I wanted to get involved with real women.</p>
#5 - Laurie	<p>(detailed presentation in "Laurie's Story")</p> <p>I had to go out and be myself as a lesbian self, or self-destruct.</p>
#9 - Angie	<p>(little discussion of <i>struggle</i> to come out as a lesbian)</p> <p>The straw that broke the camel's back was in November '78 and I went to the first national women's conference in Houston....I went to Houston and it really opened my eyes to a lot of things....I had never seen a group of lesbians together like that. We went over to join them....we chatted and ate, and I was in awe looking around. My friend turned to me and said, "So we are TG." What's that? I said. She said, "temporarily gay"....The Houston Conference was really kind of the beginning when I was feeling my power.</p>

(next page)

Table 4: Concern for Sexual Fulfillment

Informant	Group 1 - Textual Data
#1 - Renee	I wanted my husband to make me feel different sexually. But he wasn't what I needed. Sometimes we had good sex, but I didn't want to hug him and comfort him and love him at night. You should do that. Why wasn't I? I was totally confused. I remember feeling how awful that was, that I was living a lie.
#2 - Ingrid	The sexual aspect with my husband (1 year) was painful and uncomfortable for me. I had no feeling of lust to get me through. He was interested only in himself.....The first person I was sexually involved with in a complete way was with a woman. I knew then I had never really been married .....What I was experiencing with a woman sexually is what a marriage should be.
#4 - Katie	When I met my husband-to-be I was afraid of sex. We did not have sex before marriage, but we were sexually very passionate with each other. He gave me a lot of space to feel sexual. I enjoyed penile sex, I was infatuated with the penis. But the gratification was for him. I did not have sexual gratification.  .....Sex with women was a very beautiful awakening (at age 44, after divorce). Sex is a very important part of my life.
#5 - Laurie	See details in "Laurie's Story." .....I couldn't make love with my husband in a sexual way. I had a terrible time with that. I didn't know what to do.
#9 - Angie	Issue of sexual fulfillment, wanting to be with a woman, not mentioned.

(next page)

**Table 5: Paid a "Price" as a Result of Non-Access to Legal SSM**

Informant	Group 1 - Textual Data
#1 - Renee	<p>I feel depressed about being gay. We don't go to [extended] family functions anymore because of their anti-gay remarks. I have had to fight for access to my grand-children. My partner's family would disown her if she came out to them.....<i>If I had the legal right to marry I would feel like I belonged, like I am one of the "norms."</i> Heterosexuals are FREE to do whatever they want. We are like prisoners....</p> <p>... If we were married, I could share in her retirement which is much larger than mine. I would have her health insurance, and I would be protected by legal inheritance rights.</p>
#2 - Ingrid	<p>Legal SSM would make it easier to be out. I have kept a lot under wraps because I had to as a teacher. If SSM were legal, obviously I wouldn't have had to have done that....I could spend less energy getting our legal documents in order. Financially, it's just not the level of honesty this relationship deserves. Something beautiful should be surrounded by honesty</p> <p><i>Not being able to be open and honest is a BIG PRICE. If I could have married legally, I would NOT have had to pay this.</i></p>
#4 - Katie	<p>We are not accepted, that's the price. We are still secretive about our relationship.</p>
#5 - Laurie	<p>(See "Laurie's Story" for details)</p> <p>NO QUESTION! Anytime you are not allowed to be free you pay a price - you pay an emotional price, you pay a price in your own progress, your own development, and in your health.</p> <p><i>There is no question that I would have looked to marry a woman earlier in my life if SSM were legal.</i></p>
#9 - Angie	<p>No, probably because I am not out - no-one knows. But I can imagine for some people there is a price, like with health benefits if children are involved. Legal SSM would make a lot of things better, like military benefits afforded to spouses (this informant was a former military spouse).</p>

(next page)

Table 6: Many Advantages and No Disadvantages from Legalizing SSM

Informant	Group 1 - Textual Data
#1 - Renee	<p>When we were first together we wanted to get married, like other people. We couldn't get gifts like other people.....I think it would be wonderful if we had SSM.....I think if there was a marriage commitment and a house and a legal tie to it, they[lesbians and gay men] would work harder to keep it. We have property together. If something happened to one of us, we don't know what's going to happen to that person left behind – legally. We have no rights. We should have the rights that heterosexuals have.....Without marriage, there is no [legal] tie.</p> <p>If SSM is legal, it would be more accepted by families. The outside world thinks, "If its legal, it's OK." You take gay people who have been together 10, 12, 20, 25 years, but people look at you like you are just room-mates, or sisters. Legal SSM would change that.....If SSM was possible, I would feel I BELONGED somewhere.</p> <p>I see all kinds of advantages. I am near retirement. My partner's retirement is <i>much</i> larger than mine, if I were married, I would be getting her retirement. Medical coverage – all those benefits I don't see any disadvantages</p>
#2 - Ingrid	<p>It was good for me to come out publicly, so a wedding and public marriage I think would feel even better.....We could spend less energy setting up benefits, financial protections for the relationship.....There would be a new level of honesty. This could make relationships last longer, make you try harder.....If we were able to be legally married, we would be more visible, we could find each other more easily. No disadvantages.</p>

(Table 6 continued)

**Table 6: Many Advantages and No Disadvantages from Legalizing SSM**

Informant	Group 1 - Textual Data
#4 - Katie	<p>Legalizing SSM would make one feel that it is OK to choose a partner, that you are FREE to do that. You would be more at ease sharing your life with this person because it is accepted in the public eye and you don't have to hide... Without legal SSM, medical benefits for you partner is always going to be in question. And raising children without legal marriage is difficult..... That's where the frontier is..... Legalizing SSM is important, it's very important.</p> <p>Look at my partner and I – at our age we still do not say the word 'lesbian' to either of our parents. As lesbians and gay men become more visible, there is more acceptance. Even if SSM is legal there will always be homophobic people out there. We need to educate the public..... There is going to a movement toward SSM, very slowly, with struggle all the way..... No disadvantages.</p>
#5 - Laurie	<p>(See "Laurie's Story" for details)</p> <p>Legal SSM would validate the lesbian and gay community. We are human beings like everyone else. A commitment to marry is a more serious commitment and this would cause less turnover in relationships, add stability to the lesbian and gay community, and maybe children! We would all share in these stabilities. We would be recognized by our straight neighbors as a married couple. We could live together honestly. We wouldn't have to hide.... If SSM were legal I would have known it was OK to be a lesbian..... No disadvantages.</p>

(Table 6 continued)

**Table 6: Many Advantages and No Disadvantages from Legalizing SSM**

Informant	Group 1 - Textual Data
#9 - Angie	<p>Legalizing SSM might help with acceptance of lesbians and gays. I think it is helping. I look at it as an opportunity for benefits, health benefits, survivor benefits, purchasing a home, credit. I think there are a whole lot of issues that go along with it. It would cut down on some of the red tape should a partner become ill. All of those things. It would force couples to take care of these legal issues. You put off doing a will.</p> <p>Legal SSM wouldn't improve our relationship – we have to make our own magic. Because people perceive me as straight, they don't perceive me as lesbian, SSM would have no impact on me – because of the perception that people have of me out there in the world. For somebody who is openly gay, legal SSM would probably impact them more than someone who isn't out. It might make them feel better about themselves. But it wouldn't change how I feel about myself. No disadvantages.</p>

Some commentary on these shared themes and the supportive data is appropriate here. The data collected from Group 1 informants indicated that having children and being a mother was the central purpose of getting married, and the best part of the marriage experience. Although informant #2 (Ingrid) left her marriage after only one year, an explicit reason for divorce was her recognition that she could “never put a child into an environment with the man she had married.” Among the four informants who were mothers, all reported this as an empowering and profoundly enriching experience (two reported that they experienced lesbians who had never had children as “self-centered”). This was startling to the present researcher who has never had children and who has spent twenty years among lesbian feminists who have also never parented. Interestingly, on the pre-test demographic questionnaire I *forgot* to ask if the informant had children, an example of how easily a researcher can overlook essential variables due to limitations in their own point-of-view.

Three informants reported fine relationships with former husbands, a finding which counters the powerful stereotype that lesbians do not like men. Lesbian identity is often viewed as contingent in some form on prior negative experiences with men. These data deconstruct that particular myth.

The pivotal role of identity quest for these previously married informants is also striking. Four of the informants in Group 1 report a long-term, exhausting struggle to understand and acknowledge their lesbian identity. One of the most eloquent statements in this research is the description by informant #2 (Ingrid) about what it felt like to finally arrive at a sense of “being at home with herself” (at age 53). She experienced a sense of “fully belonging to herself and in the world” when she publicly stated her love for her partner in front of an assembly of friends at their formal commitment ceremony:

It is one of those doors or windows you go through, for the first time in my life, I had a sense that I belonged here. I mean, in my soul I never experienced that before.....I think there is nothing to me more moving than to have been alienated by the world your whole life, and then to have found that moment in your life when you *belong* to yourself, and you *belong* in the world you are in. I guess you would say, peace comes over you.

The data from Group 1 suggest that women who have been previously drawn to traditional family arrangements may have a particularly difficult time finding a pathway to a lesbian identity, even when they know “deep inside” that they are lesbian. The findings suggest that such women may have special needs for support and unique concerns that differentiate them from lesbians who have never been in heterosexual marriages. One of the unique concerns reported by four informants in Group 1 was that the issue of sexual fulfillment was discussed in considerable detail during the interview. For these women, the need for sexual fulfillment was interwoven into the difficult process of transforming their lives and family structures to become more congruent with lesbian self-identification.

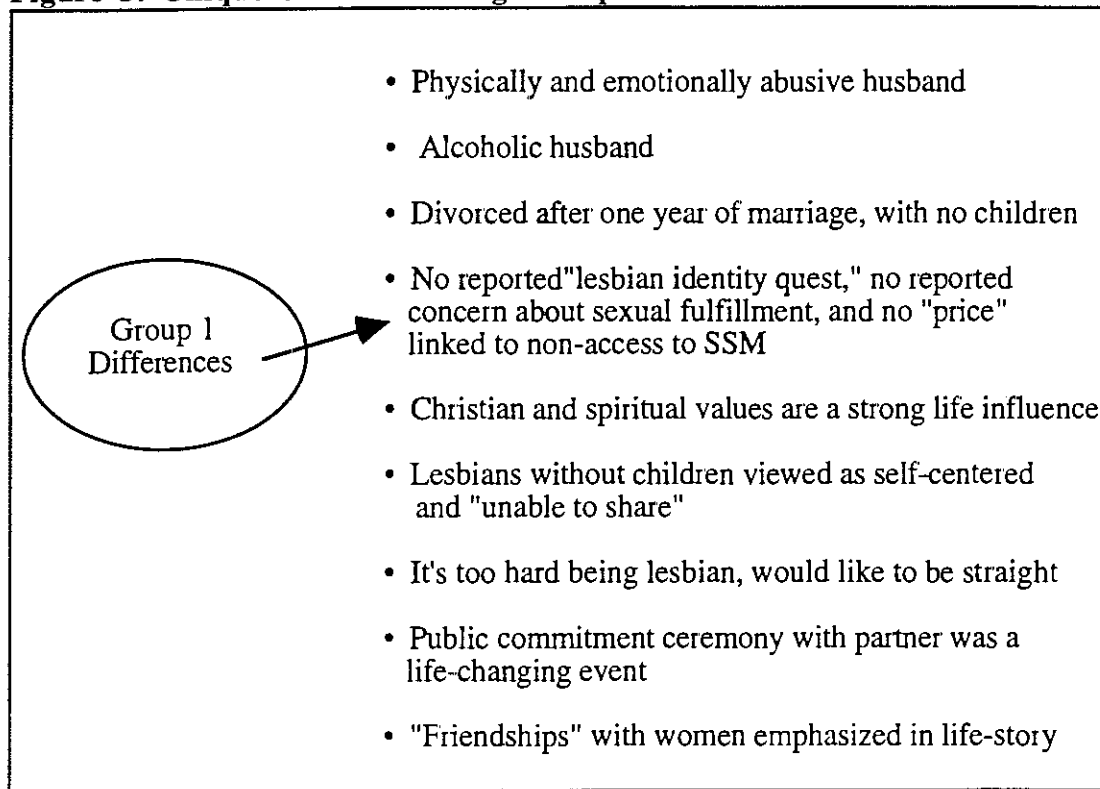


The stories I have collected from the informants in Group 1 suggest that the need to construct an identity with which one feels congruent is far more difficult for lesbians than is frequently acknowledged. All informants reported unequivocally that same-sex marriage is a civil right, all supported political and legal efforts to obtain the right to legal same-sex marriages and four reported that had directly paid a “price” as a result of non-access to legal same-sex marriage. The one informant (#9 - Angie) who did not directly pay a “price” reported that this is due to the fact that she is completely closeted and is perceived to be straight by her professional colleagues. She pointed out, however, that legal SSM would make things a lot better for a lot of people, including lesbians with children and lesbians and gays in the military. In short, these data suggest that the previously married lesbians in this sample have struggled with the consequences of stigmatization, and at the same time have conducted their lives with remarkable courage and resilience.

### **Differences among Group 1 informants**

Key variations in the life stories of Group 1 informants are presented in *Figure 3* below. In general, each unique theme is reported by a single informant, however a couple of unique themes were reported by the same informant. For example, Katie (#4) discussed Christian values as a dominant theme in her life-story and also emphasized the importance of friendships with women throughout her life. Of the themes presented in *Figure 3*, only one is shared by two women in Group 1 (#1 - Renee; and #5 - Laurie), and this is the view that lesbians who have never had children seem to be self-centered and unable to share. All other themes emerge only in one informant’s account. It is for this reason that these themes are identified as “unique themes” or “differences” among Group 1 informants. These unique themes in reported life experiences will not be further substantiated by textual indicators, but they should be noted when designing future research on older lesbian lives.

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**Figure 3: Unique Themes Among Group 1 Informants**

## Group 2

### Janice's Story

Group 2 informants were older lesbians who had never married. "Janice's Story" is an illustrative one in this group and a diagram of core themes in her story, followed by Group 2 comparisons, with diagrams and tables of textual indicators as appropriate are presented. Neither the story I have selected as an exemplar, nor the entire set of stories, is intended to reflect the universe of experiences of older lesbians who have never been in a HM; they serve to mark only what is possible in the terrain of lesbian lives.

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Janice is a 58 year old woman whose beloved partner of 17 years died several years ago at age 42 after a six month struggle with stomach cancer. Janice views her 17 year relationship with her lesbian partner as the best and happiest years of her life, and she

appears to continue to grieve this loss. Like Laurie, Janice describes herself as “one hundred percent” Portuguese and grew up in the center of an urban, working class, Catholic Portuguese community. She has never lived outside her birth city, although after her “wife’s” death she took a job driving a charter bus which requires her to travel extensively throughout Canada and the Eastern seaboard. Janice has identified consciously as “gay” for 46 years, *which distinguishes her as having the longest period of self-declared lesbian identity among the 10 women interviewed*. She knew she was “different” from a very early age, and this sense of difference was consciously evoked when she was required as to a child to attend the endless weddings celebrations that are central to urban Portuguese culture. She comments, “I just didn’t know why people wanted to do that [get married], it was like, is there something wrong with me that I didn’t see something good in this?” Janice left her family home at age 17, and began working in a local factory where she became involved with her first woman lover ( a married woman) at age 18. After a number of years in “the secret life,” Janice met her beloved partner at the textile factory where they both worked. In the seventh year of their relationship, they married in a formal wedding ceremony with twenty guests, a full buffet, music, dancing and wedding rings. Both Janice and her “wife” were devout Catholics, but could not marry in their favorite cathedral

Janice has never been in a heterosexual marriage and has never had a sexual relationship with a man except for kissing a boy her mother pressured her to date when she was 16. She insists that she “felt nothing for him” and “felt nothing while kissing him.” Janice discovered shortly thereafter that “kissing a woman is a whole different meaning.” She states emphatically, “I never wanted to marry, I never wanted children, and I was already backing away from that at an early age, probably 14.” Janice decided that marriage and everything associated with it was “a bunch of baloney, you can throw that out.” However, she qualifies this viewpoint, “Unless it’s a gay wedding, then that’s a whole different ballgame. A whole different ballgame.”

Janice links her disinterest in heterosexual marriage and having children to the extreme physical and emotional abuse she experienced in her own relationship with her mother. She explains, "I didn't want to have children because I was afraid that whatever triggered my mother would trigger me. I did not want to treat a child the way I was treated." The details of trauma in Janice's relationship with her mother are among the saddest and most wrenching of all the incidents of physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and spousal abuse that were reported as life-shaping events by 7 of the 10 women I interviewed.<sup>2</sup> Janice's mother did not want another child after the birth of her two sons, and her third and unwanted pregnancy "just blew her mind." In repeated efforts to end the pregnancy Janice's mother "took a lot of medication to get rid of me." Janice views this fact as "why I am the way I am today. Nobody else in the whole family is gay, so I associate it with the medications." When Janice arrived despite these abortion efforts, her mother disliked the infant "right from the beginning" and *gave her away at birth to her husband's cousin*, a married woman who had dearly wanted a child but could not have one. From this point on, the mother also rejected her husband – "She never bothered with her husband again....they had no relationship at all," although they remained married until they died, two years apart, at ages 85 and 87. Unfortunately, Janice's relationship with her adoptive "godmother" was not left in peace. In recurrent fits of rage, her biological mother took her daughter back, seemingly to humiliate the godmother, the husband, and Janice. Janice went back and forth between two families until she was 16 years old. During each episode, Janice was routinely beaten by her mother, and prohibited from communicating with her godmother, the caregiver. Janice deeply loved, with an attachment that was clearly reciprocal. Janice acknowledges that, "My dad was my buddy," but he was afraid of his

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<sup>2</sup> It is important not to assume that lesbians are lesbians because of abuse experiences. The experience of abuse is a common covariant of women's experience in general. Thus, a history of abuse should not be used as an "explanation" for lesbian identity. Adrienne Rich observed long ago, that if women became lesbian because of abuse experiences in a misogynist world, then most of the women in the world would be lesbian.

wife and never overtly interceded to stop the child abuse. Janice relates one incident when she was 11 or 12, when her mother had forcibly taken her back:

We used to live in the house right across the way from where my godmother lived. I'd get up in the morning and look out the window at 5:00 am to watch her go to work and wave to her. She waved back to me the very first time. My mother was watching from the window below, saw her, and came up and gave me the worst beating....My father saw this but never said anything. He in turn told my godmother not to wave to me. So in the morning I would wave, but she wouldn't wave.

During this episode, a doctor was called to the house to attend Janice because she had stopped eating and had become dangerously ill. Her two older brothers had compelled the mother to call a doctor to the house. The doctor forced Janice's return to her godmother's home and informed her mother, "If you do not do something this child is going to die." The shuttling between two families continued until Janice was 17, when she was finally able to move to the home of the young woman who had befriended her at the textile factory. Leaving her mother's home for good was a turning point in Janice's life. On the day of her departure, her mother had beaten her up badly, "I was full of bruises, I was bleeding, I had scratches all over me.... In fact, a cop came with me to get my stuff [at my mother's house] and he said, 'Don't you ever see this woman again.' My mother was pretty scared by this so she didn't bother with me again. That was pretty much my childhood."

When Janice reviews her life she finds it remarkable that she did not "turn out bad, like get into drugs." She attributes her resilience to the value she places on being a loving person and to the deep love she has experienced in three primary relationships in her life – with her beloved wife, with her father, and with her godmother. Loving and giving love are very important to Janice. She exclaims, "I have so much love inside of me, that's why

I give so much. I have all the feelings inside that I never had when I was a kid. I just want to give them out.” Janice’s strength and sense of self-respect are apparent, as is her gentleness. I look at this older woman carefully, noting her striking, direct blue eyes, her rugged physical outline, and the carefully tended home she has bought for herself. Her upstairs tenant knocks on the door to show her something about her dog, and Janice returns to the interview.

Interestingly, a sense of filial loyalty is central to Janice’s sense of being a good person, and despite all of her hardships growing up, she carefully tended both parents throughout their elder years. When Janice’s mother suffered a complete nervous breakdown when Janice was an adult, Janice was the only person she wanted, and Janice came and took care of her to the dismay of neighbors. When her parents were in their 70’s, she bought a house for them, which she still owns. She resided in her own apartment but came daily to look after her mother and father. Janice comments, “People used to say to me, ‘Your mother did all this to you, how can you be the way you are?’ It is something I couldn’t explain. It was just what I had to do. I did what my heart was telling me to do. .... On her death bed she told me she loved me, but it was actually too late. But I have no regrets because I took good care of her.” After Janice’s mother was placed in a nursing home, Janice came to live with and care for her father in the home she had bought for them. Of the seven years that Janice lived alone with her father she says, “We had a ball. I took him everywhere. He had money in his pocket. He could do what he wanted. He was so happy.” Janice identifies strongly with her father, whom she described as a calm, loving man, who was loved by everybody, especially “kids.”

This background provides a framework within which to view and appreciate the significance of Janice’s relationship with her lover, Mary. Janice summarizes the quality of their remarkable marriage:

Mary gave me a wonderful life and it made up for all the years that I didn’t have that. I think that’s why she was there. We had a wonderful

life. I think she was there for that purpose too. We had a good life. There was a lot of love between us. More love than I had ever seen. I was just so overjoyed and it was wonderful. But then she had to leave which was a very tough thing. Again, a lot of good years there. Probably something I will never have again. I can say if nothing else comes into my life I have had 7 years with my dad that were great, plus the 17 with my Mary and nobody can take that away from me. If nothing else, I have all that.

This relationship revolved strongly around the principle of filial loyalty and being a “family,” values which are pivotal to Janice, and to her Portuguese culture. Mary also had an ailing mother to care for, and Janice began to help whenever she was needed at Mary’s home - “If she needed me I was there. As the years went by our love just got stronger and stronger, we bonded so completely. She knew she could rely on me and I could rely on her....We never had serious problems. I can’t tell you why. Maybe it was just because we cared so much for each other.” After about five years, Janice left her own apartment and moved in with Mary and her elderly mother. Mary’s mother was “just crazy about Janice.” She encouraged “the girls” to get away for vacations, which they frequently did, taking an assortment of Mary’s nieces and nephews with them. Janice describes these happy times with obvious pride, “It was a family thing. We went snowmobiling, skiing, took the kids to Disney. The kids still love me and call me “Aunt.” I am still a part of the family....It was a wonderful part of my life, probably the best part.”

After seven years of this happiness, Janice and Mary decided to get “married.” *At the time, few of their gay friends had heard of such an idea, and Mary thought Janice “was nuts.”* However, they discussed the idea for three months and decided to go for it. Janice explains her motivations, “It was just something that I felt I wanted to do. Everybody else gets married, they are in love so they get married, so we’re in love, so let’s get married.” The wedding ceremony was a special event:

We had a few friends over. We had it at a friend's house. There were about twenty people there I guess. We exchanged our vows there and exchanged rings and had a little party, like everybody else does. It was a very solemn thing.....Nobody else knew outside of those twenty people who were there. But they were very good friends of ours, and it was very nice. We had a little buffet, we had a little dancing, and it was like an ordinary wedding. So from that day on we were married, we were one person and that's the way it remained.

*Janice views her marriage to Mary as the most important turning point in her life. The marriage added a new level of security that she had never previously known: "It made me feel good inside. I knew I had one person I could really rely on, and trust, and do everything with. I was always a very happy person when I was with Mary. [The marriage ceremony] changed my life. Everything was different after that ceremony."*

When Mary was diagnosed at age 42 with stomach cancer, Janice once again tended a person she loved through the dying process. Janice emphasizes the blessings in this time together, "We had those last six months of reminiscing about our whole life together. We got to talk about so many things.....She was very happy and peaceful when she died." Mary's last words to Janice were, "Find someone, don't be alone." Although Janice would like very much to remarry and has dated actively in the context of a large gay and lesbian social community, she has not met someone with whom this is possible. Her loneliness and unassuaged grief are palpable to me, and I find myself appreciating this complex, sturdy, self-reliant, and obviously kind older woman. Her marriage with Mary has truly stretched the frame of the possible within the historical period she inhabits.

Janice believes the purpose of heterosexual marriage differs significantly from the central meaning in same-sex marriage, the former being most frequently "for convenience" and the latter being "for no other reason than love." Although she has never disliked the institution of heterosexual marriage, she believes most women marry a man for the security



of having a husband who will “make all the money, buy all the nice things, and do all the things they think they cannot do on their own.” Nothing in Janice’s life has ever changed her mind such that she would want to marry a man. She states that she has never been envious of the many male-female couples in her extended family and she comments wryly, “As down and out as I have been in my life, I have never said, ‘Gee, I wish I had a man in my life’.” She has clearly pondered the meaning of “marriage” prior to her interview with me: “Heterosexuals marry for different reasons. I think we love, we are really in love. I think we have a stronger love.....When I married Mary it was for no other reason than that I loved her dearly.....Marriage with heterosexuals is financial.....I am not saying there isn’t love there. I am sure they love one another, but they seem to have more problems than we do.”

Janice clearly thinks of herself as “the marrying type.” She enjoyed wearing her wedding ring, and she always wanted her own family – with a woman. She says with enthusiasm, “I would certainly marry again if the right person came along.....I guess I just like the whole concept of being married.”

She is articulate about the personal cost to her of being in a marriage – an exceptional marriage by all accounts – that is not acknowledged by society. She has consciously struggled with her status as “married person in her own mind” versus “married as a legal fact” when filling out the requisite personal information forms in doctors’ offices. She describes a “*dilemma of conscience*” presented in this seemingly simple daily-life occurrence, visiting a doctor’s office. Should she adhere to the constraints of society or honor her own authentic self, especially given the value she places on her “marriage”?

Well, I’ve always responded the way people want you to respond [by marking “single”]. At the time you had to respond that way. It wasn’t a good feeling because I was already in the relationship with Mary. So it was a feeling that I wanted to put down I am married, but I couldn’t do that.....*I didn’t like doing that because here I was married, in my own*

*mind I am a married person and I should be putting this down.* I wore the wedding ring and everything. It was tough to put those answers down knowing that inside that wasn't the truth. It was like- this is not who I am, this is who I am. But you have to do that, so you did that. And, as precious as their rings were to both women, they both kept the origin and meaning of the wedding rings hidden from their families. Janice explained to people that the ring she wore was her father's ring, while Mary kept her wedding band under another ring, but she always wore it.

The most painful price linked to the non-legal status of their marriage occurred, sadly, at Mary's death. When Mary died with Janice beside her, that moment ended Janice's role in the "family" decision-making about Mary's funeral and burial:

When she did pass away I had no say in the thing. We had talked about buying a plot for ourselves, for her and I. We wanted to be together even after death. That never came about. I was not part of picking out the casket and her burial clothes. I was not a part of that. That was the part that hurt because we wanted so much to be together that we wanted to buy that plot but it never worked out that way. She had to be buried where her mother had a plot. That's the lousy part of this thing, not being seen and recognized and all this stuff, because you can't do the important things that should be done. You don't have the right to do them. That part hurt a little bit. There was nothing I could say. They didn't know anything anyway. Well, I don't know if they knew, they probably did.

Janice views this as "the only bad part" of their marriage, because she couldn't bury the most beloved of her life where she wanted to, and should have been able to do as her surviving "spouse." Not being able to negotiate the funeral as Mary's recognized spouse appears to be linked to the profound grief that continues to surround Mary's death, and this

has deeply struck at Janice's resilient spirit. She reports, "I can't be buried with her. That was the only downfall of it all. If that were possible, I am sure we would still be together growing old."

Although Janice believes that the status of "legality" would not "make a bit of difference about how much she loved Mary," she feels strongly that she would feel a lot better about being lesbian if same-sex marriages had the same legal status as male-female marriages. In her view, legal equality would make it possible for "all of us to be really open about everything – and that makes you feel better inside." Janice resents the price of having to hide, to be inauthentic in a society which would punish what she views as "the best part of herself." In her view, legalization of same-sex marriage would pave the way to greater social acceptance and visibility for lesbians and gays in general:

I think if we could really be open about everything it makes you feel better inside. Half of your life you are hiding and the other half you're not. So, if same-sex marriage was all legalized and everybody agreed with it, then I think we would all feel better about ourselves. It's like we feel good when we are with our own kind, but yet when you get with other people it is like you have to hide your true person. *That person is the best person. The one you are hiding* ..... If they could be their real self, I think there is a whole different person inside there.

There is a whole different person.

Janice speculates that heterosexually-identified persons "may just be jealous because more of us stay married longer than they do. Maybe we can outlast them as far as holding a quality marriage together." In Janice's view, there are many benefits that would result from legalizing SSM. For example, it would increase social contact between persons who choose same-sex or other-sex partners – "People's attitudes would have to change, you could all socialize together."

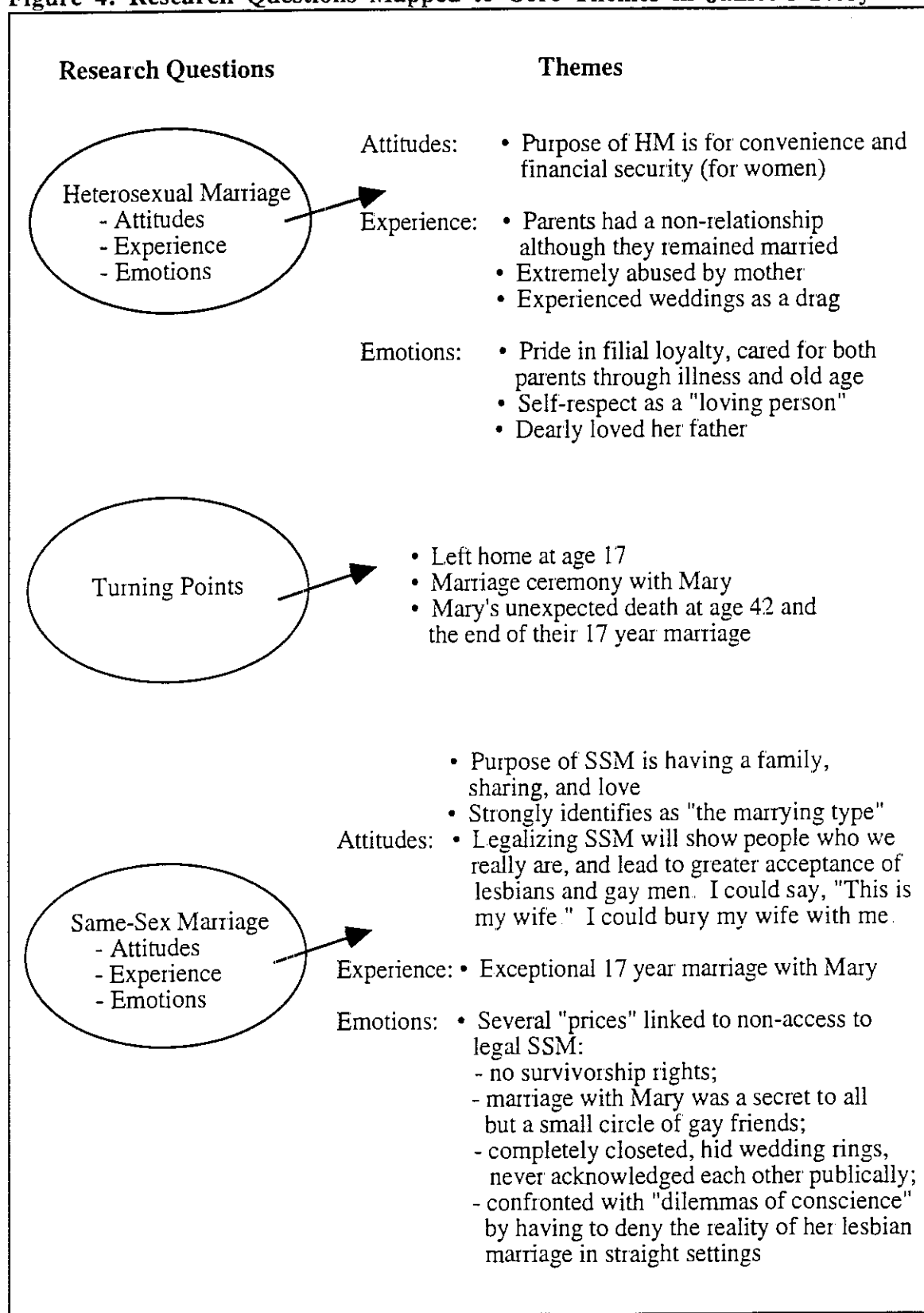
Despite the fact that same-sex marriage is not legal, *it is important to note that Janice clearly believes she can “be married in her own mind” in the context of a relationship in which there is “marriage-behavior” and “marriage-affect.”* Janice confidently exclaims that having the legal right to marry would have no impact on whether she would consider marrying someone she is dating, *“If I wanted to marry her, I would marry her whether it was legal or not.”* The sad part, she acknowledges, is that she couldn’t say, *“This is my wife.”* “Is marriage a civil right?” I ask her. “Of course,” she replies.

### **Research questions and themes in Janice’s story**

The data in Janice’s story can be mapped to the first three research questions that guided the research effort, as illustrated in *Figure 4* below. In *Figure 4*, the specific, ideographic content – the core themes – in Janice’s story are mapped around each question: 1) HM attitudes, emotions, experiences; 2) Turning points; and 3) SSM attitudes, emotions, experiences.

(next page)

**Figure 4: Research Questions Mapped to Core Themes in Janice's Story**

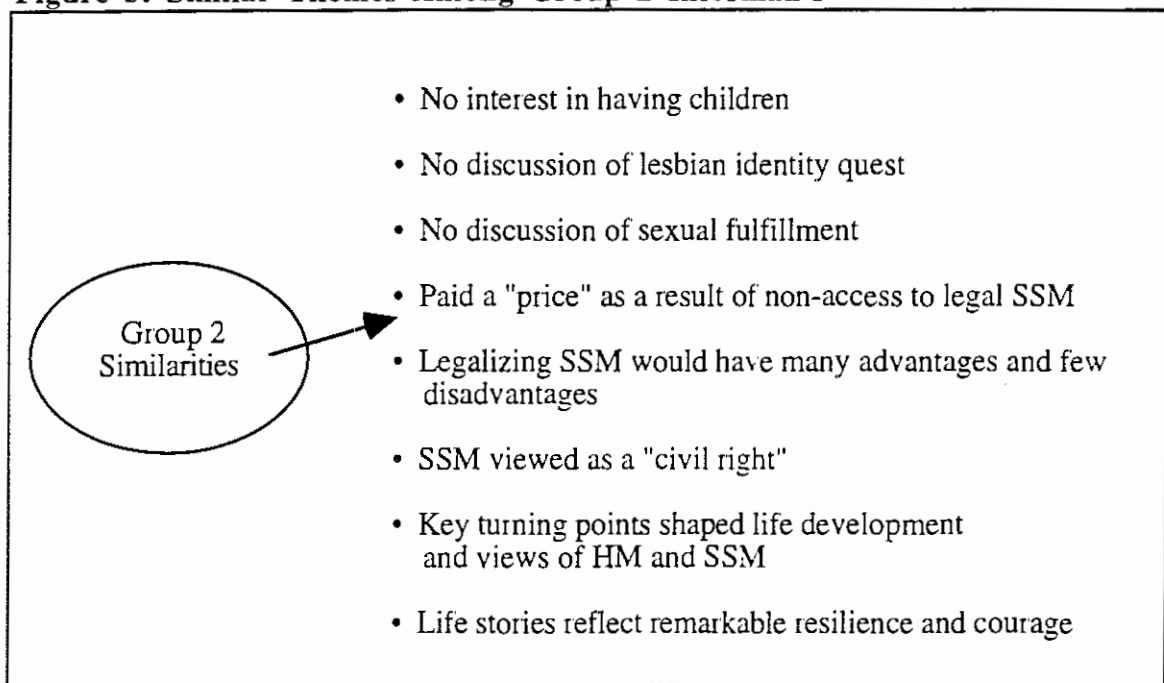


## Group 2 Comparisons

### Similarities among Group 2 informants

Figure 5 below presents similarities in the core themes reported by older lesbians who have never been in a heterosexual marriage. There was strong consensus among all five participants with these specific themes.

**Figure 5: Similar Themes Among Group 2 Informants**



The women in Group 2 reported no interest in having children, did not discuss a profound struggle linked to self-identifying as lesbian, and did not discuss at all the issue of sexual fulfillment. All five informants specifically stated they “never wanted to have children.” Interestingly, the issues of lesbian identity quest and sexual fulfillment are noticeable for their *complete absence* in the life stories reported by informants in Group 2. These concerns did not surface in an interview that was organized around the topic of marriage and same sex marriage, as they did for the women who had been previously in a male-female marriage. This is marked between-group contrast. The data do not suggest

that identity and sexuality concerns are associated with age of first intimate lesbian experience, since there is no significant difference in the average age at which women in Group 1 and Group 2 reported their first intimate experiences with women. Group 1 reported first lesbian experiences at ages 10, 13, 18, 33, and 44 ( $\bar{M} = 23.6$ ) and Group 2 reported first lesbian experiences at ages 18, 19, 20, 25, and 30 ( $\bar{M} = 22.4$ ). The role of identity quest and sexual fulfillment in lesbian identity development are important questions for further research with different subgroups of lesbians, possibly with larger samples that permit probabilistic analysis.

Of the *shared themes* reported by Group 2 informants, I have selected two as usefully elucidated by precise textual analysis: 1) the price of non-access to legal SSM, and 2) the benefits that would result from legalizing SSM. The two tables that follow present relevant textual data.

(next page)

**Table 7: Paid a "Price" as a Result of Non-Access to Legal SSM**

Informant	Group 2 - Textual Data
#3 - Martha	<p>Yes. We have to face all of the legal inequalities in retirement income, rights of survivorship, and insurance protection when a "spouse" has a catastrophic illness.</p> <p>If you are legally married, the surviving spouse gets 100% of your benefits, if you are not married you automatically lose 1/3 of your deceased partner's income. Also, non-married partners are not protected by catastrophic insurance coverage. I have tried unsuccessfully to register my partner, but have been denied. There is no solution for lesbian couples if one partner becomes catastrophically ill – you can lose your home. Heterosexual married couples get this protection.</p>
#6 - Debbie	<p>Yes, I had to go and pay for a will to take care of something that should have been part of what I would have with a marriage license. It comes down to money. That's the bottom line.</p>
#7 - Paula	<p>No, I have not paid any price. The institution of marriage has no impact on me. But everyone should have the choice.</p> <p>IF SSM were legal we would be more supportive of our gay friends who marry. I could even say, "I am going to my girlfriend's wedding. She's gay, and she is getting married!"</p>
#8 - Stacey	<p>Not directly, just not being able to be honest, living in the closet.</p> <p>I couldn't live as a lesbian, you just couldn't do that. You <i>always</i> gave the picture of being straight</p> <p>Right now, if I was still teaching, I wouldn't be able to do this interview.</p> <p>[Stacey omits here the behavior of her "relatives" when her partner of 25 years died – her survivorship rights were completely violated although she did not link this to a "price" paid for the non-legal status of her lesbian relationship]</p>
#10 - Janet	<p>(See "Janice's Story") I had no say in matters when Mary died. We hid our wedding rings. I could never say to the world, "This is my wife." I had to hide the best part of me.</p>



**Table 8: Advantages of Legalizing SSM**

Informant	Group 2 - Textual Data
#3 - Martha	<p>Legal marriage could make a difference if we wanted to split up. It would make it more complicated to leave, whereas now if you want to leave, you leave .... Without a legal connection, you just leave when you want to leave and there is nothing to stop you. When people make a public statement of commitment, that is a big step, it is binding .... It is very easy for lesbians to get in and out of relationships .... Lesbians and gays haven't had to face the issue of legal commitment, I mean unless they have chosen to do so .... Although I don't think legal SSM would contribute to longevity in our relationships. I think that has much more to do with what we saw at home as children ....</p> <p>If SSM were legal, we could more easily socialize with heterosexual couples, invite them to our parties, go out dancing more often in straight crowds. We would be more accepted. We would feel more comfortable at college reunions. We could invite heterosexual people to our parties. This would enlarge our social circle. We would have more support from heterosexual couples</p> <p>The advantages of legal SSM are that you would have legal standing with government bodies – for medical coverage, property issues when one partner dies, those kinds of issues .... Retirement issues and rights of survivorship are very important issues.</p>
#6 - Debbie	<p>Legalizing SSM would not change me in any way .... In terms of how I view myself as a lesbian, I am more interested in legislation to prevent discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or sexual preference than in legal SSM. I think that has to happen first. How can you legalize SSM if you are really not allowed to be gay .... Being legally married with my partner would not make me feel any different about our relationship.</p> <p>One thing straight people seem to be nervous about with gay relationships is that they figure we hop from bed to bed. Although it seems stupid, legal marriage would help heterosexual people perceive us as people who are serious about our relationships.</p>

(Table 8 continued)

**Table 8: Advantages of Legalizing SSM**

Informant	Group 2 - Textual Data
#7 - Paula	<p>Even without legal marriage I would do my best in a marriage.....I just don't see how a legal SSM would bring out the best in me in my relationship – the best is always there. Marriage to me is not about a legal piece of paper.. And legalizing SSM would have NO impact on how I feel about myself as a lesbian. It could have an impact for other people.....some lesbians, if they are insecure in their relationship, would feel safe if they could marry.....For my sisters and brothers out there, it would mean the world to them. I would love to see that happen for people who need that. I would love to see it legalized for people period.....I know there are a lot of gays and lesbians who really want to marry legally</p> <p>Legalizing SSM would create more support among ourselves for our friends who are getting married. If it was legal, we would say, "It's great you are getting married." There would be more support for marriage from our own community. If it becomes legal, we will begin to believe in it because it is acceptable, so you would get much more support from your sisters than you get now. We could be more open.....I would even say, I am going to be in my girlfriend's wedding, she is gay, and she is getting married."</p>
#8 - Stacey	<p>If SSM were legal I would probably be more open with our friends or the straight world. That would be the only thing. I would probably come out to everybody. Right now a lot of people don't know.</p> <p>The advantages of legalizing SSM have to do with property rights and legal rights. The disadvantage is more intrusion from the government. I think lesbian relationships would probably be more secure. I know a couple and if they were legally married, one would work and the other would continue in school with health benefits from her spouse. Right now, they both have to work. If they were married, they could adopt a child. We would be able to do things like that. I don't know if legalizing SSM will lead to greater acceptance.....Our society still does not accept mixed [bi-racial] marriages.</p>

(Table 8 continued)

**Table 8: Advantages of Legalizing SSM**

Informant	Group 2 - Textual Data
#10 - Janet	<p>(See "Janice's Story") It would make you feel better inside, we would feel better about ourselves.....We could show people who we really are.....People would like us better and appreciate us.....There is a whole different person. If we could be who we really are all the time, the world would be a better place. If SSM were legal, people would accept us more</p> <p>It wouldn't impact how I saw my wife or myself.....If it were legal, I could say, "This is my wife." The advantage would be that you could tell the whole world. If I got sick, I could say, "You ask my wife what she wants to do with me."</p> <p>The disadvantages could be if a person married just to get the other person's house, you could lose a lot, so legalizing it would make people think a lot more than they have to now.</p> <p>I don't think legalizing SSM would make a bit a difference in my feelings for my partner. The only difference would be you could tell people about your marriage.....It would make a difference in socializing, you would be able to socialize together with heterosexual people, even though there will always be a percentage who look down on you.</p>

The data given in *Table 7* and *Table 8* indicate that the issue of paying a "price" as a result of non-access to marriage, and the advantages that might result from legalizing SSM, are strongly shared themes among Group 2 informants, as they were within Group 1. Several of the statements by informants in Group 2 indicate a high level of knowledge about benefits linked to the status of being legally married. Informant #3 (Martha), who has been consciously feminist since high school, had done a great deal of work long before her interview with me to legally protect the 25 year marriage with her partner. The disparities between what she could arrange even with the assistance of a lawyer and what is guaranteed by civil marriage were clear. This highly educated, lesbian feminist activist

explained, “There are no solutions for lesbian couples if one becomes catastrophically ill – you can lose your home as a result of the debt incurred from the illness. A federal law protects male-female married couples from this potentially devastating loss.” It is possible that some lesbians and gay men have begun to pay more attention to the fact that numerous benefits linked to legal marriage are not recoverable through legal efforts, or piecemeal “domestic partnership” programs.

The AIDS crisis may be a catalyst for educating some lesbians and gay men about benefits linked to civil marriage status. Martha (#3) stated, “You become aware of legal issues when you start thinking about long-term care and the financial implications. The government has set up rules protecting the assets of married people .....How do we protect our assets? The government does not recognize our relationships.” Martha was the most concerned of all the older lesbians I interviewed about the legal and emotional consequences of the death of one partner in a long-term same-sex relationship, perhaps due to the fact that she had spent time with Alzheimer’s patients.

Group 2 informants agreed that numerous advantages and few disadvantages would result from legalizing SSM. Among these, the most frequently mentioned advantages were that getting married requires a higher level of commitment to a relationship and makes it harder to “just leave” the relationship. Both of these could contribute to stability and longevity in same-sex relationships because partners would be encouraged to work a little harder to maintain a relationship. Increased relationship “security” might be an important benefit for lesbians who chose to marry.

Informant #7 (Paula) pointed to the provocative issue that lesbians in her experience have frequently not been supportive of “their sisters who marry” and that legal SSM would increase support among gays and lesbians themselves – for each other. This insight about how lesbians (and gay men) perceive and behave toward the relationships of their “sisters and brothers” is important and suggests an issue for further research, i.e., to what extent lesbians (and gay men) *respect* the intimate relationships of their “sisters and brothers”? Is

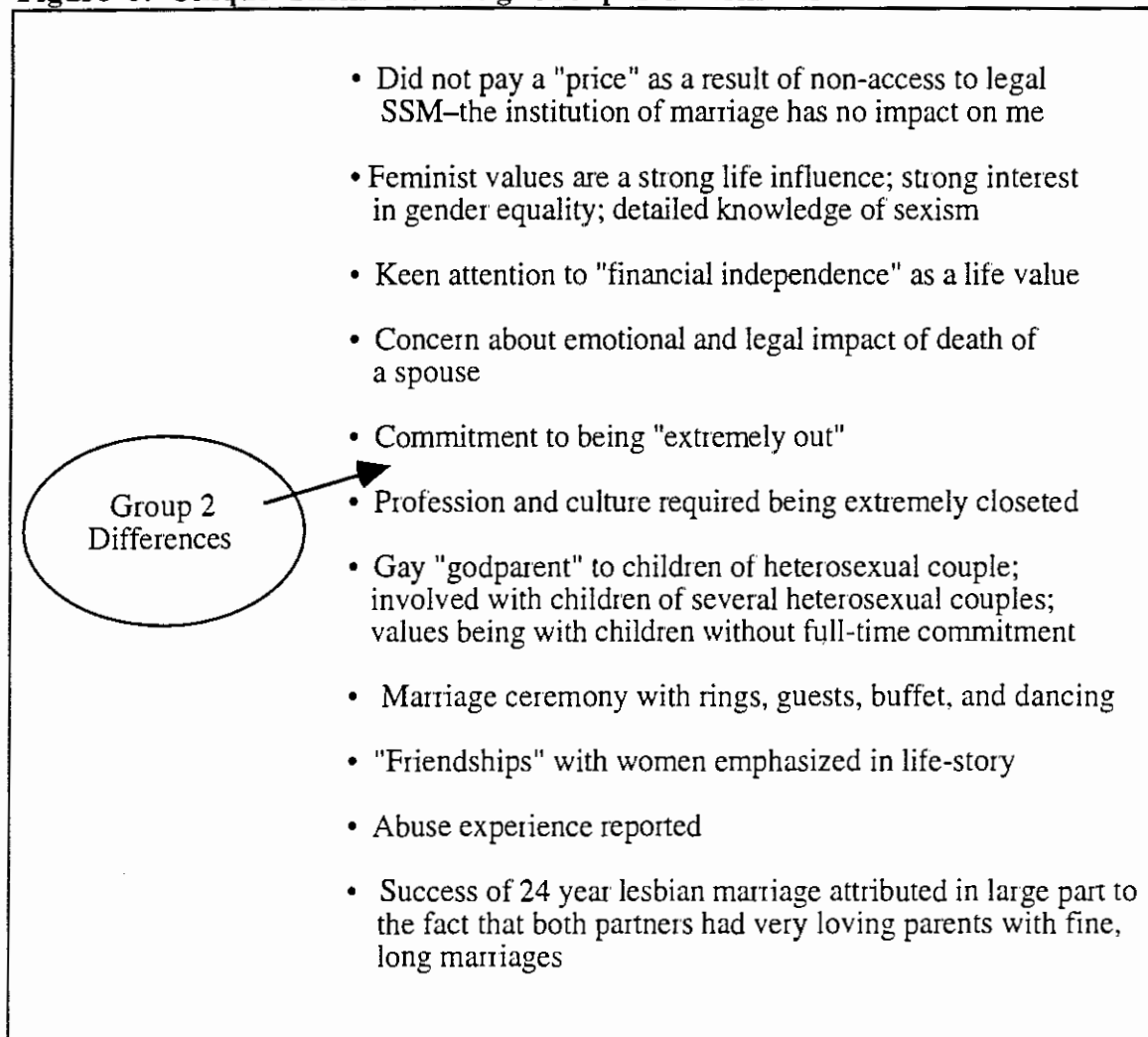
it possible that legalizing SSM would improve *the status of committed same-sex relationships in our own communities?*

Finally, all the informants in Group 2 agreed that being permitted to legally marry would not impact the quality of their love for their partners. What makes love “love” is apparently not associated in their view with “legality.” No informant noted that “love” can be thwarted, even broken, when committed couples struggle with additional “burdens” to the relationship that result directly from *not having* certain legal protections.

### **Differences among Group 2 informants**

I conclude the analysis of Group 2 data with a brief delineation of interesting variations among the core themes reported by informants. These are presented in *Figure 6* below:

(next page)

**Figure 6: Unique Themes Among Group 2 Informants**

Among the five older lesbians who have never been in a male-female marriage there is a high level of variation in life themes, and relatively fewer shared themes. This is particularly evident when these data are compared with the data for Group 1 informants. It is possible that lesbians who have lived an entire lifetime outside of traditional heterosexual gender scripts construct their life experience with a high level of nonconformity and individual uniqueness, an hypothesis that requires more empirical corroboration.

### Comparisons between Groups 1 and 2

I have identified core themes which are common to both Group 1 (Previously in HM) and Group 2 (Never in HM), and those which are unique to each group. Five shared core themes emerge across groups, and three themes seem to be strikingly different. These are represented in *Table 9*.

**Table 9: Comparisons Between Groups 1 and 2**

<u>Between Group Common Themes</u>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paid a “price” as a result of non-access to legal SSM</li> <li>• SSM viewed as a “civil right”</li> <li>• Legalizing SSM would have many advantages with few disadvantages</li> <li>• Key turning points shaped life development and views of HM and SSM</li> <li>• Remarkable courage and resilience reflected in life stories</li> </ul>	
<u>Between Group Differences</u>	
Group 1 (Previously in HM)	Group 2 (Never in HM)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wanting to have children</li> <li>• Lesbian identity quest</li> <li>• Strong concern with sexuality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No interest in having children</li> <li>• No lesbian identity quest reported</li> <li>• No discussion of sexuality</li> </ul>

A striking finding in my view is that informants in both groups agree strongly that they have directly paid a “price” for non-access to legal SSM. The exclusion of lesbians from the institution of “marriage” exacted a cost in the personal lives of the women I interviewed, providing evidence that prohibiting persons from choosing to marry a same-sex partner constitutes discrimination. This further suggests that legalizing SSM may be an

important goal for those who are committed to opposing discrimination that specifically targets homosexual citizens.

It is important to note the diversity of the older lesbians I sampled – five were of Northern and / or Southern European ancestry, three were African American, and two were Portuguese American. They were also characterized by a broad range in socio-economic status. This should counter the argument I have encountered in academic and political settings that “the only lesbians and gays who care about the conformist luxuries of marriage are affluent and White.”

The two informants who reported that they had not *directly* experienced a “price” linked to non-access to SSM immediately qualified their statements. Informant #7 (Paula), whose life circumstances were such that she has not (yet) experienced marriage-linked discrimination, observed that some lesbians and gay men, herself included, have criticized those who would like to marry, but that legalizing SSM would lead to more support and respect for each other’s “marriages.” Informant #8 (Stacey) reports that she “did not pay a price directly, *just not being able to be honest, having to live in the closet*” for the entire duration of her career and her 25 year lesbian relationship. The content of her story suggests the reality of a very large “price.” She lost her partner of 25 years due to sudden illness in the year prior to her interview with me. She reported that when her partner died, the biological family descended on their jointly owned home, claiming this and that. One blood relative was given the deceased partner’s new \$20,000 car and then asked the informant to pay taxes on the car. This highly educated informant seemed resigned to the disrespect displayed at her lover’s death, but did not incorporate this devastating experience as an injustice (a “price”) that she should not have been subjected to.

There is strong consensus among informants in both groups that the “price” attached to non-recognition of SSM is intimately linked to pervasive homophobia in culture. As informant #4 (Katie) states, “We are not accepted, that’s the price” Informant #5 (Laurie) states with emphasis, “Anytime you are not allowed to be free, you pay a price,



you pay an emotional price, you pay a price in your own progress, your own development, and your own health.” Informant #1 (Renee) reports, “*If I had the legal right to marry, I would feel like I belong.*”

All informants agree that SSM is a civil right. The typical response was, “Of course,” as if this was, and should be, self-evidently obvious. Both groups also agreed about the *advantages* that might result from legalizing SSM. The informants reported substantial benefits linked to legal SSM, with only two disadvantages reported – greater intrusion from government, and the possibility that one might marry a same-sex partner for greed, i.e., property. The benefits included greater acceptance of lesbians and gay men in our society; being able to be “out” as a lesbian and as a married lesbian; living with a level of honesty that a beautiful relationship deserves; increased validation for the entire lesbian and gay community; increased ease socializing with heterosexuals; equal legal rights; support for working hard to maintain the longevity of one’s marriage; and legal support for lesbian (and gay) couples with children.

Also common to informants in both groups is that there were decisive turning points in their lives, but there was great variation in what exactly constituted these points. A few of these events were negative, for example, being raped at age 10, or being abused by a spouse so severely that the informant realized she was in danger, but the majority of reported life-changing events were “awakening experiences,” such as “coming into my womanhood at age 44 and experiencing sexuality with a woman,” or “a light came on when I realized I could be with a woman,” or “the birth of my children was a miracle,” or finalizing a divorce and becoming more congruent with core lesbian identity. These turning points also pointed to a theme which emerged in all the life stories, and that is the capacity of each informant to live a complex life with remarkable courage and resilience.

### The Meaning of Marriage

I have been surprised by the diversity of meanings attached to the construct of marriage, and have found that this multiplicity of meanings is not susceptible to thematic analysis. Throughout the analysis of these ten interviews I have struggled to pay close attention to the meanings linked to marriage but failed to find broad emergent themes. For example, informants variously defined the central meaning of male-female marriage as having children; the All American Dream; fulfillment of a woman's role in life; a place for hiding from self-hood; a display of public commitment; a structure for legal benefits; a manifestation of deep love between two persons who commit their lives to each other; and/or a relationship for convenience and financial security. Meanings attached to same-sex marriage are as divergent and do not appear to differ dramatically from those linked to male-female marriage. Informants indicated that the central meaning or purpose of SSM is to gain acceptance from family and friends; to bring out the best selfhood in each partner; to uphold the same traditional values that may be present in male-female marriage, such as commitment and trust; to gain important legal protections for your family, property, and children; to have a family and be with the person you love most. Scrutinizing this set of meanings does *not* reveal that meanings attached to "marriage" are distinctively different when referencing male-female marriage than when referencing same-sex marriage. The variety of marriage-meanings also does not appear to be related to whether the informant has previously been in a heterosexual marriage. This finding disconfirmed my expectation that previously married lesbians would attach greater meaning to "marriage" than lesbians who have never been in a legal, male-female marriage. Textual analysis revealed that the construct of "marriage" is no less or more important to the informants in Group 1 and Group 2. Seven of the informants in this sample expressed very positive views about the meaning of marriage for both male-female and same-sex couples. Only three informants (one from Group 1 and two from Group 2) consistently expressed skepticism about both

HM and SSM and asserted that they did not view themselves as “the marrying type,” but rather as “the committing type.”

It is with the issue of meanings that informants ascribed to “marriage” that I had to struggle as a researcher to prevent my own assumptions from obstructing what I could hear in the informants’ points-of view. I had to dissociate my own definition of marriage *as first and foremost a legal fact* from the informants’ viewpoints. In contrast to my own view that “lesbians cannot marry” because same-sex marriage is not legal, seven of the ten informants clearly conceptualized their lesbian relationships as marriages. Their points-of-view suggested that there are *multiple* dimensions in the meaning of marriage and that one dimension may be more important than another for different informants. That the legal status of marriage distinguished what is and is not a “marriage” was a position not shared by a single informant in this study.

Three primary dimensions of meaning linked to marriage were represented in the life-stories of the ten informants in this project. First, marriage suggests a certain quality of *relationship behavior* characterized by such qualities as commitment, friendship, trust, participating in family life, raising children together, shared sexuality. Secondly, *marriage is a state-of-mind*, characterized by the belief that one is “married.” The third dimension of meaning is *marriage as a legal fact*, conferred by a state-regulated civil marriage license. These dimensions of meaning were frequently *not* congruent in the accounts provided by informants.

The informants conceptualized their current lesbian relationships in the following ways:

- #1 - I feel more committed and more married to her than I did in my actual marriage, because of my inner feelings for her.
- #2 - I feel married.
- #3 - We think we are married, neither of us cares what the government thinks.

- #4 - I consider myself married .... We need a word that makes us married.
- #5 - I would like to marry if I meet the right person [woman].
- #6 - I am "the committing type," the word marriage does not apply to what I feel.
- #7 - In my current relationship I don't want to get married because I AM married. We exchanged rings, had a romantic dinner together, told each other how much we loved each other, we kissed. I am married. That's it.
- #8 - What's a marriage, that's the question. I was in a "committed" relationship.
- #9 - We are committed..... Marriage means commitment..... When I think of marriage I think of heterosexual marriage. I am so used to telling people I will never marry again, *but I think, "Yeah, I am married. I am committed to one person. But I would never go to my co-workers and say, "I'm married."*
- #10 - In my own mind I am a married person. I wore a wedding ring.

This pattern of responses suggests quite unambiguously that the older lesbians in this sample conceptualize themselves as married. That they are able to think of themselves as "married" indicates that they have ascribed to "marriage" a different meaning than the conventional view of marriage as a *legally* recognized relationship between a woman and a man.

Clearly, the lesbians in this sample believe that "in their own mind" they are married, and they prioritize all the marriage behaviors that characterize their relationship, behaviors which are similar to the set of marriage behaviors in a female-male relationship. But why do they de-emphasize the important legal meaning that our society has accorded to the married state for several centuries? This dissonance between the dimensions of meaning ascribed to the married state is reflected in the remarkable statement by informant

#9 (Angie), *"I think, 'Yeah, I am married. I am committed to one person.' But I would never go to my co-workers and say, 'I'm married.' "*

It seems, then, that informants do ascribe a different meaning of marriage to same-sex relationships, than to female-male relationships; a difference that may be summarized as discounting or ignoring the relevance of "marriage as a legal fact." While this belief that "one is married in one's mind" suggests a degree of courage and fierce stubbornness in the face of a homophobic society, it is also a curious state of affairs. It is difficult to imagine a woman stating – prior to women's suffrage – "I feel like I am voting in my own mind. I read all of the newspapers. I accompany my husband (or father or brother) to the polls. I believe I AM voting." How could a woman claim she was voting, when she was not actually doing so? Consider another example. An African American student is denied admission in 1997 to the University of Texas Law School. Imagine such a student asserting, "Although I was not *in fact* admitted to law school, in my own mind I am preparing for a career in law. I am studying all the major civil law cases, reading the newspapers, and discussing legal issues with my peers on a daily basis." Again, such a statement would very likely be perceived as incongruent with reality.

Why do lesbians in this sample so consistently overlook legal validity while conceptualizing their relationships as marriages? Certainly, the *quality* of these long-term, passionate lesbian unions *deserve* the status of legal marriage, and the richness of these relationships stand out in luminous detail throughout the extensive data collected for this research. A possible explanation can be derived from the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism which proposes that individual identity is embedded in and constrained by the social context. Shared social experiences provide the basis for core beliefs and expectations about what is possible. Thus, the *meanings* that the individual constructs for her life are mediated by the shared social world. And as Lott (1997) has recently emphasized, "Beliefs mediate experience." Thus, one reason that the informants de-emphasize the legal meaning of marriage, while describing their own relationships as

marriages, may reside in the fact that their social context has never socialized them to *believe* that their unions might be or should be granted legal status. The fact of being embedded in a heterosexist social world which continues to accept the exclusion of homosexuals from the legal institution of marriage may contribute to the fact that the older lesbians in this research under-emphasize legal status while believing “in their mind” that their relationships are “marriages.” The fact that the extraordinary women in this study have been able to maintain fine, long-term lesbian relationships, which they describe as “marriages,” may also speak to a deep human need to foster and maintain such primary alliances, with or without helpful legal structures.

### Conclusion

At the conclusion of this project, I believe more firmly that lesbian and gay identity is entering a new socio-historic period, one in which our intimate relationships will be recognized as valid by state and federal law, and in the end, by the majority of citizens in this democratic country. I believe that empirical research can contribute to efforts to grant full equality for lesbian and gay citizen. Empirical findings are especially important for deconstructing stereotypes, even those that are held by lesbians and gays about themselves, such as the misguided idea that legal same-sex marriage is an agenda item for conformist, upper-middle class gay and lesbian individuals. This study demonstrates the importance of including *older lesbians* in any scientific investigation of lesbian lives. Their viewpoints enrich our scientific understanding of lesbian identity, and this in turn contributes to informed political efforts to gain equality for lesbian and gay citizens.

There are a number of limitations in the present study. First, the findings of this exploratory, qualitative study cannot be generalized to the larger population of lesbians. The findings in this study are provocative, but they need to be further investigated and tested with appropriate methods. Further research on same-sex marriage should include gay men as well as lesbian participants, with samples cross-sectioned by several age

groups if possible. The amount of data I collected made grounded theory data analysis difficult and time-consuming. While such in-depth data from interviews are valuable, especially in view of the scarcity of scientific research on older lesbians, in further interview-based research, I would carefully limit the number of interview questions and focus them on a small set of research questions. Interview-based research and grounded theory analysis require a step-by-step process that cannot be done in a short period a time, which is an important consideration when planning this type of research.

The strength of this research is that I have identified shared themes among the informants, as well as unique themes within individual interviews, while preserving each informant's unique point-of-view. One intention in this project was to create an interactive dialogue that benefited *both* researcher and participant, and it is my hope that this was achieved. To this end I have agreed to send the complete thesis to all participants, since each woman indicated that she would like a copy.

These data suggest a number of directions for further research. First, special efforts should be made to study old (65+) and very old (85+) women and men as these are particularly hidden populations with potentially invaluable perspectives on lesbian and gay identity development. Participants who have experienced catastrophic illness (their own or their partner's) would be an important addition to an investigation of long-term lesbian and gay relationships and the impact of catastrophic illness on views about same-sex marriage. Issues related to death and dying and their impact on views about same-sex marriage are an important area for future research, especially among older lesbians and gay men.

One of the most intriguing findings in this study is that only lesbians who had previously been in heterosexual marriages reported concern about sexual fulfillment. A new study should specifically explore the importance of sexuality in long-term lesbian relationships. The issue of "lesbian identity quest," especially with regard to lesbian women who are in and seeking to leave a "heterosexual" marriage, is also an important topic for further research. It would be valuable to research other cohorts of women on the

topics of marriage and same-sex marriage. The ten women in this project were all born between 1936-1945, and were influenced by historical forces that differ for both older and younger women. It is possible, for example, that younger cohorts of lesbians and gay men will have less difficulty with a “lesbian identity quest” because homosexuals as a class of citizens are slowly gaining more rights and visibility in contemporary culture. It is possible that more lesbians (and gay men) will want to parent children, as rules around marriage and adoption change to give gay parents the same supports provided to heterosexual parents. These are interesting questions for empirical research.

I have learned more from this research than is possible to present in the framework of this academic thesis. Each woman I interviewed taught me something about the resiliency of lesbian identity in the context of our current historical period. Each woman has inspired me, and each has impressed me with her own unique beauty and light – impressions that are often difficult to convey in a written document. As a result of this research project, I have become more interested in further developing narrative research methods. A life-story approach, within an interview context, invites participants to actively reflect on their lived experience in a manner which highlights meaning, pathos, and depth. This quality of “deep data” is of great value in the scientific domain, which far too often jettisons the depth of human identity in the interest of quick and easy measurement methods. In the end, it is a privilege to have engaged in this research, with the women who so generously agreed to participate. There is no more meaningful project I could have done, and for this I am thankful.



**Appendix A:**  
**Biographic Profiles**

## **Biographic Profiles of Informants in Group 1 (Previously in HM)**

(the number in front of each name represents the actual number of the interview)

### **#1 - Renee**

Renee was born in 1944 and was age 52 when I interviewed her. She is of mixed Polish-Irish ancestry, and was born and raised in a small agricultural, working class town in Northern Maine. Renee reported that she always knew she was “different,” but she went through a very long and very difficult struggle to consciously identify as lesbian. She married when she was 18 years old after a two month courtship with Richard, who was “a nice person.” She married under a lot of pressure from her family and Richard, and she explained, “I married to get a place of my own ...and I didn’t want to be dating anymore.”

Renee “felt safe” with Richard and this was central to her choice to marry him among other available men. She described him as “not aggressive at all, he wasn’t a threat at all.....He was just a very nice person.” Richard’s gentleness and care for her were important because Renee was sexually abused by her brother when she was 12 years old and she had left home at age 17 after her father, who was alcoholic, began sexually propositioning her. She developed a strong friendship with her husband, which continued even after their divorce, “I felt like we were more friends than husband and wife.” Despite this positive bond, Renee felt dissatisfied with their sexual relationship, and she wanted him “to make her feel different sexually.” She began to feel very guilty that she “didn’t want to hug him and comfort and love him at night.” She explained, “You should do that. Why wasn’t I doing that? I remember thinking how awful that was, that I shouldn’t be here with him. I felt like I was living a lie.”

Renee’s three children were the focus of her marriage. Despite both parents’ devotion to their children, their marriage was a rocky one with five separations, and finally a divorce in 1979, ending a 17 year legal marriage. Renee did not become active with her lesbian feelings until after her third child when she met a woman to whom she became

irresistibly attracted. She says, "I became this brave person all of a sudden." She was about age 25 when she began this lesbian affair, although both women had male partners. At this time, Renee started to realize that she was "either gay or bi-sexual," but she was still very confused about her attraction to women. Over the next 10 years she had four affairs with women lovers. During her fourth affair, she "finally realized she was lesbian." At this point in her life, while still married to Richard, she began to actively socialize with other lesbians, and one night at a gay bar she met Sarah, the woman who became the love of her life. With Sarah's unswerving love and support, Renee slowly moved toward an extremely difficult and emotionally exhausting divorce process which was finalized in 1979, ending a 17 year marriage. Her deepest worries were for the well-being of her three children. She continues to feel guilt about ending her marriage. Renee is emphatic that it took enormous courage for her to stand up and be her lesbian self – She gave up everything to be with her lesbian lover.

She now owns a lovely home with Sarah, and they have been together in a committed relationship for 17 years. Renee asserted with strong emotion that she has definitely paid a price for coming out as a lesbian and committing herself to her lesbian partner. She continues to confront extremely prejudicial statements and disrespectful behavior from both her own extended family and her partner's. Her accounts of being repeatedly subjected to homophobic discrimination in the context of her extended family system are among the saddest accounts among the ten interviews I collected. One son-in-law has attempted to keep her away from her grand-children because he "hates gays." She and her partner continue to live very closeted lesbian lives. Although Renee is now out to her children, her partner is not out to her affluent family because she is certain they would disown her. Renee says, "I am not a proud gay, I still struggle with it. Even though I am not attracted to men, I think it would be so easy to be with a man. My life would be so easy. I live in the closet every day of the week when I go to work.....It is hard for most of us, it is. I don't care what people say." At the same time, Renee is clearly proud of her

own courageous quest to become her lesbian self and to rearrange the conditions of her life to reflect this core identity. She is pleased that one of her adult daughters views her mother as a “woman of wonder.” Renee says, “I became what I wanted to, so my daughter respects that, and I think my other daughter does.” She began to cry when she said this, and concluded, “My heart lead me to being lesbian, as hard as it is, I can’t go back now.”

## **#2 - Ingrid**

Ingrid was born in Rhode Island in 1940 and was 56 years old when I interviewed her. She is Northern European American with mixed German, French, and English ancestry. Her adolescence and early twenties were marked by considerable emotional confusion regarding her feelings about women, and she felt terribly alienated from her immediate family and social environment. Unfortunately, at age 13, she was sexually abused for a period of time by a 22 year old woman. This woman abruptly abandoned Ingrid, perhaps from fear of detection, and left Ingrid with confusing feelings of rejection. During her teens, Ingrid’s mother made frequent disparaging comments about two women who lived together up the street, who wore “mannish clothes.” Her mother also criticized her often “for always hanging out with the girls,” and pressured her to spend more time with boys, saying, “Don’t you have any guy friends?”

When Ingrid entered college she developed a deep emotional relationship with her college roommate, Karen, in her sorority. Of this relationship, Ingrid explained, “We weren’t really sexual partners, but we almost were.” When another college woman began to develop “an emotional relationship” with Karen, Ingrid, “felt like a jealous lover would feel,” but she could not understand why she felt this way. She had “no language at the time,” which contributed to her confusion during this difficult period in her life.

Ingrid attended many weddings during and after college involving her sorority sisters, and she sang in a duo at wedding ceremonies. When she was present at weddings she was aware of feeling that she “did not belong,” but once again, she could not articulate

the source of these feelings. After graduating from college she moved back in with her family and began to feel increasing pressure to marry, both from herself and from her mother who frequently called her “an old maid.” Her college “love” had married and moved further away. Ingrid was 26 and felt lonely, “I found myself sitting home alone, I mean with my parents on a Saturday night, and they were watching Lawrence Welk. I had such a deep deep loneliness and feeling that I did not belong anywhere.” Ingrid wanted very much to have children and when a gynecologist informed her she would not have children if she did not hurry up, she set out to find a man to marry, “I recall getting in the car and driving over to the man I eventually married. Like I went purposely .....I just set out to get married.” She knew from the beginning that the marriage was not right, she dreaded the wedding, but she couldn’t get out of it, “I was in cement.....I didn’t know what else to do, either.”

Curiously, Ingrid and her husband spent their honeymoon in Provincetown. Throughout the entire honeymoon, Ingrid kept a charcoal portrait she had had done from a photograph of her college “roommate” at the foot of their bed. The portrait was to be a gift for Karen. Ingrid laughed deeply while telling this story and wryly commented, “Did I catch this on a conscious level? No, I did not.....Where was I through all this?”

As with Renee, the first woman I interviewed, Ingrid found the sexual aspect of her relationship dissatisfying, “it was painful and uncomfortable.” She explained further, “To tell you the truth, it was similar to being abused. I was done to.....I was simply acted upon. It had nothing to do with me.” Ingrid’s marriage lasted exactly one year, and though the marriage showed her what she did *not* want, she still did not know what she did want in an intimate relationship.

That turning point arrived when she met and fell in love with the first woman with whom she developed a committed, long-term relationship. When she discovered complete sexuality for the first time with this woman, she “knew she had never really been married before.” They built a house together during their seven year relationship and in Ingrid’s

view, there were many qualities in their relationship which were impossible to have in a marriage with a man. Ingrid greatly valued the fact that she and her lesbian partner were able to develop an equal partnership, with equal responsibility. She also valued the quality of their sexual relationship, which was not possible for her with a man. Ingrid was able to speak honestly about how she felt and to feel that she was understood. In Ingrid's view, This need "to share herself, to be vulnerable, to be heard, to get inside another soul" is why she is with women.

This first relationship "fell apart" for many reasons, one of which Ingrid attributes to the stress on the relationship that resulted from Ingrid's insistence on being extremely closeted to protect her career as a teacher. She went as far as washing two sets of sheets each week, hanging them on the line to dry, so neighbors would see that there were "two beds." Her lover needed to be in a more open lesbian environment, and "took the opportunity to do so" when one appeared.

Ingrid entered a second lesbian relationship which she did not describe in detail. When I interviewed her, she was with her third lesbian partner, Sandy, with whom she intends to spend the rest of her life. They have been together for five years and both Ingrid and Sandy are deeply committed to each other. A major turning point occurred in Ingrid's life when she and Sandy held a formal commitment ceremony with all of their friends present during the second year of their relationship. When Ingrid stated her vows to Sandy in front of the people gathered, she experienced a profound transformation, which she described as, "a feeling for the first time in my life that I belonged to myself and to the world I was in." After a lifetime of "not belonging," Ingrid finally found her home. She was 53 years old, "I guess I have to say, peace comes over you. If I could help anyone get there easier than it was for me, I would do so.....It's such a long, hard struggle, you know. Anyone working on it has my praise."

Ingrid is keenly aware of the cost of being closeted on her life experience as a lesbian. One of her regrets as a teacher was that she was never able to come out to her

students, to be a model for them, and to show them they could relate to a lesbian. She “kept a lot under wraps” because she felt she had to. She is emphatic that legal same-sex marriage would contribute a great deal to the equality and honesty with which lesbian and gay couples live their lives and their committed relationships, “I think it would be grand!”

#### **#4 - Katie**

Katie was 60 years old when I interviewed her and was born in 1936 in an affluent, rigidly Catholic family. Like Ingrid and Renee, she is Northern European American, with mixed German, French, and English ancestry. Katie left her 19 year marriage when she was 44 years after a terrible struggle with her husband’s alcoholism. Like several of the women I interviewed, Katie reported that she had been sexually abused as a child, although she mentioned this only briefly and I did not pursue further questions as this fact was not central to my current research concerns. Her story, beginning in an emotionally isolated childhood with two distant, cold, authoritarian parents, through a 19 year marriage that began in deep love and ended in tragedy, to her “awakening to her woman self” at age 44, is powerful, disturbing and inspiring. At the end of our interview, Katie looked at me from her large comfortable meditation chair, laughed deeply, and then stated seriously, “I have learned that nothing is forever.”

Katie believes she has always been lesbian, but as with other women in the cohort I interviewed, she lacked models and information about lesbians. This repression of her lesbian identity was strengthened by her rigorous Catholic training and deeply felt faith, which were reinforced at home, at Church, and in the Catholic schools she attended for her entire education. Although she lacked a close relationship with her parents, both of whom regretted having five children, Katie developed an early knack for close friendships with women. She met her “soul-mate” and best friend, Ellen, when they were both 8 years old. This nonsexual, life-long, friendship continues to enrich Katie’s life as an unfailing source

of support and care. When Ellen married several years before Katie, Katie felt she had “emotionally lost the woman she loved.”

After graduating from her private highschool, Katie’s parents refused to further educate her, despite their wealth, so she lived at their home and became successfully employed as an executive secretary in a large shipping business. She earned a substantial salary at this time, saving most of it, which later helped her future husband start his own business career. While working and living at home with her parents, Katie was courted by a number of eligible men, all of whom were rejected by her extremely prejudiced parents. They refused to permit a Italian man she dated to enter their home, because he was “Italian.” Katie dutifully went along with her parents and ended relationships with men her parents rejected, until she met John, a manager at the McDonald’s where her younger brothers worked. Her parents were horrified that their daughter was dating “a McDonald’s manager” and intervened strongly to prevent the relationship, even sending Katie to Europe to discourage her interest in him. However, John had won Katie’s heart by his gentle and constant devotion, and she became determined to marry him, especially after consulting with her Catholic priest, who advised her it was “time to go on with her life.”

Katie and John had a beautiful candle-lit, Catholic wedding, although Katie’s parents refused to attend the ceremony. In the beginning of the marriage, John gave her the love, respect, and nurturing she had never received from her parents. They based their marriage on Christian values, they were “serving God” by marrying and procreating, agreeing in advance to have four children. Katie refers to her children as “the apex of her marriage.”

This marriage that began in so much love moved slowly, but very steadily, toward destruction. By the seventh year of the marriage, John’s drinking became increasingly serious. He had already become an extraordinarily successful and wealthy businessman. They owned a fifteen room house, employed a French maid, and flew frequently to luxurious ski resorts for vacations, “Money was no object.” Then, he was fired, they lost



their 15 room house – they went from having everything to being evicted. Throughout many years of unbelievable events, Katie was determined to stay faithful to her marriage vows, “through sickness and health, until death do us part.” When John ended up for a repeat stay in a state mental institution, psychiatrists advised Katie to leave her husband, to save herself and her children. This advice from “expert authorities” convinced her, and marked a turning point in her life. She filed for divorce.

Katie’s life changed dramatically the moment she became a free woman. She worked to support her children, and began once again to feel and explore the lesbian feelings she had experienced much earlier in her life, before her marriage. With generous encouragement from her large friendship circle, she soon met a woman with whom she fell in love. They began to live together and developed a strong relationship that lasted almost 15 years. This relationship ended painfully when Katie’s partner left her for a younger lover, although the separation ultimately was beneficial to both women. When I interviewed Katie, she was ecstatic about the woman she had been dating for two years. They bought a house together and moved in during the time I was interviewing Katie. The issue of “marriage” was a relevant topic, and they did, in fact, hold a formal commitment ceremony, with a honeymoon in Washington, D.C., six months after this interview.

Katie views her relationship with Deb as the best relationship in her life, one that has been enriched by the considerable life experience both women bring into the relationship. Deb was also previously married and, like Katie, has children and grandchildren to whom she is devoted. There are many strengths and shared values in their relationship, including a profound sexual connection, careful financial management, and a shared commitment to spiritual practices, including praying together.

Katie is emphatic that same-sex marriage should be legalized. Although she and Deb are out to their children, they are not out at work or to their parents. In Katie’s view, lesbians and gay men continue to pay a large price as a result of pervasive homophobia in culture. Katie believes there will be “a great movement toward same-sex marriage, very

slowly, with struggle all the way.” However, she concludes, “Even if we gain the right to legal marriage, “there will always be homophobia.”

#### **#5 - Laurie**

(Laurie’s story is presented in detail in the Results and Discussion section of the manuscript. Please refer to this account for more detailed information about Laurie).

Briefly stated, Laurie is a 52 year old, Portuguese American woman whose marriage of 29 years is the longest of the women I interviewed. In the fifteenth year of her marriage, she came out as a lesbian to her husband. They agreed to stay in the marriage to parent their two children, whom they loved deeply, although they slept in separate beds, and were never together again sexually. With her husband’s knowledge, Laurie began to actively socialize in the lesbian community, soon meeting a woman with whom she had an eight year relationship. This relationship was conducted without her children’s knowledge, in privacy and outside of Laurie’s family home. When Laurie approached the age of 50, the prospect of living into old age with Keith, in a “false marriage that looked like a marriage but was not a true marriage,” prompted her to finally move gently for divorce. She completed a careful divorce process that was finalized in 1994, and she remains good friends with her ex-husband. At the time I interviewed her, she was dating a woman she liked very much.

#### **#9 - Angie**

Angie is a 51 year old, African American woman, who was born in Rhode Island in 1945, one of the youngest children in a large, Protestant family. Weddings were a frequent event in her childhood and early adulthood. She attended all of her older siblings’ weddings, and she continues to enjoy attending friend’s weddings or their children’s weddings. She laughs with pleasure at the thought of some of these weddings, and asserts, “I like weddings. I always like going to weddings.”

When Angie went to college in the 60's, she explained that "girls went to college to get married, that was the thing to do." Angie met her husband playing softball. She was attracted to him immediately. She pointed out that growing up in this geographic region meant there were not many Black folks so her social life in highschool had been very limited due to the taboo on interracial dating. Angie's friends told her Ken was "a good guy," and she decided to pursue him in earnest. They began dating. Unfortunately, sex quickly became an issue because Angie wanted to wait until after she was married, while Ken pressured her constantly. Finally, she gave in, and the result was that she got pregnant. Ken was in the military at the time, preparing to leave soon with his unit for West Point. Angie was prepared to leave town quietly and have the baby on her own, however, they decided to marry. Angie was 22 years old. Angie's mother gave her blessings and organized a beautiful reception on short notice. Angie exclaimed, "Of course, my mother did it!"

The young couple moved to a military base and problems began to appear in the marriage. In the second year of the marriage, Angie began to suffer abuse from Ken. The abuse worsened steadily over the next eight years of the marriage. Ken had a gambling habit and regularly lost his entire paycheck. Angie supported the family and was doing very well financially in her career. She had bought a home for the family and was sending her son to private school. Ken continued to beat her, demanding sex afterward, and verbally put her down constantly, telling her she was worth nothing. Amazingly, Angie continued to function well in her public and career life.

A turning point for Angie occurred when she attended the 1977 National Conference on Women's Rights in Houston, Texas as part of a state delegation. This conference opened her eyes to feminism and to lesbian women. It was here that she began to "feel my power." After Houston, she returned and Ken gave her the worst and most dangerous beating of her life. She was afraid of him. She resolved to divorce him, and succeeded in doing so, although she lost her house and her job in the process.

After the divorce, which was finalized in 1979, she became involved with a woman in a long-term, committed relationship. She bought a house with her and continued to raise her son, whom she loves dearly. It took her ten years to recover from her former marriage, and she still blocks out the worst experiences. She commented, "Had it not been for Elizabeth, I don't know how I would have gotten through the flashbacks and nightmares. That's the one thing I appreciate her for." Angie became increasingly unhappy, however, in her relationship with Elizabeth. Elizabeth did not seem to care whether their relationship continued or not. During this uncertain period, Angie met her current partner, Rebecca.

They were both members of a sports team and one day, Rebecca (who was straight) brought blueberries to the field. Angie remarked that she liked blueberries. A few days later, Rebecca arrived at Angie's house with fresh blueberries. They began to develop a true friendship – they were not courting each other, and Angie was not looking to date anyone. As the friendship grew over the months, Angie confided more and more to her friend, and one night during a team party, finally blurted out that she was gay. Rebecca was unfazed. Slowly, by accident and not by design, the two women found themselves together in social situations, and they began to fall in love. Angie decided to work with a therapist to end her relationship with Elizabeth, which was a difficult process. She and Rebecca have been together for six years. Angie is very happy with this deeply committed relationship and feels "married." Despite her first marriage to Ken, she continues to value the concept of marriage and commitment in a relationship. She explained, "I believe in the union of marriage. I would want my son to marry."

### **Biographic Profiles of Informants in Group 2 (Never in HM)**

#### **#3- Martha**

Martha was 57 years old when I interviewed her and was born in 1939. She is of Irish, French, and English ancestry, with a Protestant mother and a Catholic father. Martha

was one of the strongest feminists among the women I interviewed. She has been consciously committed to women's equality since highschool. When she was a teenager, she "came to grips" with her discovery that she was expected to be "the subservient one" in relationships with men. This was not acceptable to Martha, "No way. That's not me. That is not going to work." She recounted an interesting event in highschool:

I was very athletic and I remember going bowling with some of the boys. I remember thinking, 'What's going to happen if I bowl really well and beat them?' They are not going to like that. But if I purposely don't bowl well and I want to continue seeing them, will I have to pretend for the next two or three years that I can't bowl? I thought, 'No, the solution to this problem is not to bowl badly, the solution is that I have to be who I am, and if they cannot deal with a woman who is good bowler, then I guess it can't work.' I couldn't pretend that I couldn't do things just so men would not feel badly.

Martha has "positive feelings about weddings, in general." She always thought she was going to get married to a man, "There was never a sense that I would not get married." However, she never had "a yearning to have children." Neither of her parents pressured her to marry. To the contrary, they were much more concerned that she go to college, gain a profession, and be able to support herself. She explained this carefully, "Marriage fell by the wayside in comparison to college. I would disappoint my family immensely if I did not go to college."

Martha dated men in highschool and college, but she was discouraged by their tyrannical attitude toward women, and by the fact that they were intellectually boring. She wryly commented, "I think it is very hard even now for women to find men they would want to spend their life with." Martha is "appalled at how sexist our society has been and is." When she was entering her 30's, still unmarried and unpartnered, she observed that "sexism was so rampant in our society that I didn't even know how to measure it." In her

view, sexism can be summed up succinctly, “Men do not have any respect or regard for women.”

A turning point occurred for Martha when she had the insight while she was in college that, “I could be with a woman if I wanted.” Ten years later, in 1968, Martha decided that a lesbian relationship really could work because society was becoming “more open and tolerant” during the social revolutions of the 60’s. She explained, “There was a change in my thinking. I now saw a relationship with a woman as possible.” During this period she met Betsy, the woman with whom she has lived her entire adult life. When she started dating Betsy, Martha thought consciously, “I am going with Betsy, so I won’t be married, but then that won’t matter anymore because I will be with her.” This awareness freed Martha up from the idea of marrying a man. She thought, “That’s simple.”

Martha and Betsy socialized together for two years prior to dating romantically. Their friendship grew and they soon fell in love. In the first year of their intimate relationship, they created a private ceremony of commitment with rings, and a ceremony they had selected “from an Episcopal prayer book.” Martha explained, “We just knew we were going to be committed to each other.” Martha and Betsy attribute the stability in their relationship to the qualities modeled in the marriages of both of their parents. They both come from “very, very happy,” financially stable homes, with parents who loved and respected each other, and even more remarkably, negotiated and shared sex-role-scripted responsibilities. Martha and Betsy held a 25th anniversary party in 1997, after the interviews for this research were completed.

Martha raised a number of concerns that did not appear in other interviews. She is the most “out” of all the women I interviewed, as a result of a conscious decision she made while attending a march for lesbian and gay rights in Washington, D.C. Speakers at the march encouraged the audience to be “really out” so the world could see who they are. Martha was persuaded, “From this moment on I have been out everywhere.” Martha was also adamant about the importance of “financial independence for women.” She was

highly informed about the benefits attached to legal male-female marriage that do *not* extend to committed lesbian and gay partnerships. She was also keenly aware of aging issues and of protections provided by a civil marriage license that are important to aging heterosexual couples, particularly issues pertaining to property protections and financial protections from chronic or catastrophic illness – protections which are obviously not granted to same-sex couples.

Martha was clear that “from a legal framework, same-sex marriage is a civil right.” That is obvious to her, and to all of the women I interviewed. However, “self-direction” is important in her life, so she is cautious about “government interference in people’s lives.” There is no question in her mind that lesbians and gay men should have the same rights that female-male couples have. She believes that people who condemn homosexuality should spend their time on more pressing social issues:

“I don’t know why everyone is so bothered about same-sex couples. Why don’t they worry about children being beaten? Why don’t people worry about children being raised by couples who are alcoholics? Why don’t they worry about disease? I mean, there are so many more important things in the world to be concerned about.....Society should let people do whatever they want with regard to who lives with whom in a legal relationship.

#### #6 - Debbie

Debbie was 55 years old when I interviewed her and was born in 1942 in a German Italian family. Debbie has been in two long-term lesbian relationships – a former, 17 year relationship, and her current relationship of 12 year’s duration. Debbie is one of the two women of the ten I interviewed who may be described as an “outsider” to the institution of marriage. She has simply never wanted anything to do with marriage. Her first statements at the beginning of our interview, said with emphasis, were, “I could NEVER picture

myself married. I kept myself apart from it. I NEVER had those fantasies about what I would look like when I married. I NEVER fantasized about Prince Charming.” Her childhood fantasies and games centered around “cowboys and Indians” and “Tarzan and Jane” – and Tarzan and Jane had nothing to do with them being married, she quickly pointed out. She remembered, with a gleam in her eyes, that her first communion gift had been “a gun and holster set.”

Debbie is grateful that she has been completely free of marriage, “The best I can say is that I consider myself lucky not to have had to get married. I am not stuck. I can do what I want to do.” Fortunately, Debbie’s mother never pressured her to marry, and may have quietly discouraged her daughter from choosing the path she had chosen at the cost of sacrificing her own considerable intellectual gifts. Both of Debbie’s parents affirmed her love for learning, reading, and sports. When she did date a young man in highschool, “who had probably never read a book in his life,” her father kept saying, “Are you crazy, Debbie? Think about what you are doing.” She had “big discussions” with her parents because “everything was very open in our family.” She continued to date this young man, and even decided not to go to college for a year because they were considered getting married. He was “a great kisser” and he was “very gentle, but NOT intellectually stimulating” and they had a great “ethnic connection” because they were both Italian. However, Debbie eventually realized that what her parents said was “true” – she chose the intellectually stimulating route and went to college.

In Debbie’s view, the purpose of marriage is to have children, “If you want to have children you need to get married to give them a legal name and to have all of the benefits of being a legally married couple – inheritance rights, other advantage, and health insurance.” Debbie never wanted to have children, “It was just not a part of what I fantasized about.” However, a remarkable feature of Debbie’s life is that she has chosen to become involved in caring for children of several friends who are in heterosexual marriages. Debbie “likes being involved with families who are bringing their children up in a really consistent and



sensitive way.” She appreciates “couples who are married, having children, and being really good parents.” She is very close with the family of two of her former students, who are now married with two children. She explained, with satisfaction, that she is the “gay godparent” for both of the girls. She also loves her close relationship with another married couple who have one adopted daughter. She frequently babysits the girl, and will often accompany the mother, who is a professional equestrian, to horseshows. The mother rides, while Debbie babysits, and watches the horses. Debbie’s involvement with children is an important value in her life, a solution she has created which balances her fierce need for freedom and her regard for children. She explained, “I get to be involved with some really good parents and their children.....then I can turn around and go home, and be happy without giving my soul for a family.”

Although the heterosexual institution of marriage has never been important to Debbie, she did become involved in one important relationship with a man. He was a married man, and when she now looks back on this relationship, she explained, “I really loved his wife, and not him.” Although Debbie feels that she acted “unethically” by becoming involved with this man, the relationship marked a turning point in her life: “Ending this relationship freed me up because when I realized I was not going to be in a heterosexual relationship, the very first person I met was the woman I spent 17 years with.”

She and Maxine met at a mid-western University they were attending as graduate students. They began an intensely closeted relationship, and they remained closeted throughout their 17 year relationship. Maxine refused to discuss the issue of lesbianism – “She would not let me talk about it. As far as she was concerned we were just two isolated women who happened to be in a relationship. There wasn’t a whole community out there. Gosh, I wish I had known, I would have been a lot happier earlier.” Debbie did not talk to anyone about being gay until she was 39 years old.

Maxine's caution about "being out" may have been exacerbated by the fact the Debbie's mother accidentally discovered the nature of their relationship when they were both still in graduate school and Debbie was still living at her parent's home. Debbie's mother read letters they had written to each other, and a terrible battle followed. Debbie did not deny the relationship and ended up moving out. Her mother called Maxine at the university and threatened her. Debbie and Maxine continued their relationship and moved to New England as soon as Debbie got a job offer. One night, Debbie's mother arrived unexpectedly at their home at about 10:00 p.m., "toting a gun and determined to take Debbie back home with her." Debbie commented wryly, "It was really hysterical when I think about it." Somehow they calmed her mother down, sent her home; but Debbie and Maxine had to move to a hidden address, and her mother did not know where she lived "for years and years and years." In this context, Maxine may have had good reason to never use the word, "lesbian."

Debbie's independent personality insisted on more freedom than her relationship with Maxine permitted. Her "total isolation" from gay friends troubled her. Even their closest friends did not know they were lovers. But the two women enjoyed many things together – they owned a house together, and Debbie had two horses and a job she loved. Maxine's affair with another woman was the event that precipitated their break-up over a four year period. Debbie tolerated the affair for a long time, and then decided to move out – another turning point in her life. Debbie had also finally met another woman, with whom she eventually fell in love.

Debbie was emphatic that "finding Jennifer was the best thing that could have happened to me." Jennifer was a out lesbian, a successful business woman, very independent, and content to let Debbie carry on the activities she loves – horseback riding, action sports, caring for the children she loves. Debbie radiated warmth when she described her relationship with Jennifer, "Jennifer is not possessive, she's sure of me, so she doesn't have to be possessive....She goes off to play tennis and I have time to do my

thing. We have that kind of relationship, a partnership with someone who gives me space. I like that. I am so lucky.”

Debbie looks happy. Her three dogs came charging in to be fed during the interview, and she took a break from the interview to delight over them for a few moments. She walked me through her beautiful home, decorated with colorful art, sculptures, and photos of her nieces, and nephews, and the important children in her life.

Debbie views same-sex marriage as a “civil right” but she doesn’t really care about the right to marry. It is obvious to her that “if you want to marry you ought to be able to.” In her view, “We are discriminated against at even a more basic level – we are not accepted, period.” She explained, “I am more interested in legislation to prevent discrimination based on race, gender, and/or sexual preference than I am in marriage. That’s more significant to me. I could not come out to my faculty. I can not come out to all of my tennis friends. We have to be socially accepted first. How can you legalize marriage between gays if you are still not allowed to be gay?” However, she acknowledged that she paid a “price” for not having access to a legal marriage license, “I had to go out and pay for a will to take care of something that should have been part of what was accomplished automatically by a marriage license.” She concluded, “What do you need formal rituals for?” In her view, private commitment is what is most important, “I believe in the Indian way of living, you strive to live a good life, and stay with the partner you have chosen as long as it will work.”

## **#7 - Paula**

Paula was 58 years old when I interviewed her and was born in 1938, the eldest of nine children in an African American family. She grew up in Louisiana, moved to California in her mid-twenties “to be with gay women,” and then moved to New England in 1993 to live with her lover. Paula’s life-story expresses an uncommon degree of courage and openness to a wide range of experience. She has always attempted to do what

she feels is right for her to do, even when that involves “disobeying the rules.” She explained at the outset of interview, “Being the person I have always been from maybe 9 years old, I always did what I wanted to do, and suffered the consequences later.” Paula’s mother died when she was 14 and her father left the family when she was 12. She did not regret his departure because he was “a weekend alcoholic and wife-beater.” Paula explained, “My mother died for two reasons: too many children too fast so her body couldn’t heal, and because my father was constantly beating her.” When her mother died, leaving nine children, Paula “became the parent.” The youngest girl was one year old at the time. Paula’s grandparents lived down the street and they had promised their daughter as she was dying that they would do everything they could to keep the children together. They kept their promise.

The nine children, with Paula now standing in as the mother, lived in their own apartment adjacent to an aunt’s apartment. Paula knew how to survive, “I did the cooking and cleaning. I gave little jobs to the other kids who were capable of doing little things. We were very poor, but I continued to go to highschool. When I didn’t have money to get the bus to school, I borrowed it from a neighbor.” Sometimes her grandmother would tell her, “You have to stay home and help me wash today.” Paula sometimes obeyed her and sometimes did not. “There were times when I didn’t want to miss school and I wouldn’t. She wouldn’t give me bus money, and I would go right across the street and borrow money, and I would go to school. Then I would come back after school, and whatever had to be would be. I went to school because that was what I wanted to do.” When Paula got home from school she would “wash and do whatever had to be done.” Each night, her grandfather came down to check on them, “He would always ask me if everyone was in and do a head count.” Paula did this until she was 18 and then she decided, “I had to save myself, I couldn’t do it anymore.”

Paula carefully planned her departure from her family. She explained to me that throughout her life she has always known when she has had to leave. When she was 17,

she had a vision that she had to leave her family, “I knew I was going to leave when I was 18. I never talked with anybody in the family about leaving, I just knew I was leaving.” She asked the family of her closest highschool friend if she could live with them when she turned 18. They agreed. They were a “beautiful, peaceful, religious family with two girls, a mother, and a father,” and they became important models for Paula. While Paula lived with her girlfriend’s family, she had a job, was going to school, and every Sunday visited her family – “We would go to church, and I would take my little money and buy ice-cream for the kids, or whatever I could do. I would share whatever I had. So I maintained my relationship with my sisters and brothers, and with my grandparents right up until they died. Until this day, I am still the mother to my sisters and brothers.” Paula cried through much of this story, and commented sadly, “I have always been wiser than my age. I don’t know where it came from.”

Paula can remember always being attracted to women – “I can even remember in the 3rd grade how attracted I was to the teacher.” Paula began her first lesbian love affair with a childhood friend she had known since the 4th grade. This woman was “straight” and when she married, Paula was “not bothered because they were able to continue their lover relationship.” Paula met her second lover, Maria, while they were both in college where Paula was studying to be a teacher and counselor. Maria also got married and Paula was a member of the wedding party. The two women continued to have a sexual relationship after the marriage for a period of time. Paula explained, “Even today I think Maria will always have feelings for women, but she lives in this world – the American Dream, with a husband and that type of thing. We’re still good friends.” During these college years, Paula had another straight girlfriend she was in love with, but they never became lovers.

While Paula was still living in Louisiana and involved with Black, “straight” women lovers, she occasionally dated men. She was (and is) an exceptionally striking woman, and she explained, “Men were always good to me. I had no problem with men. They always loved me.” She explained that she has on occasion wanted to be married,

“Because, I guess at one point in your life, all of your friends are getting married, and you feel like, ‘Why aren’t I getting married?’ ” But Paula broke off one engagement with a young man. She was in considerable conflict about her sexual identity at this time in her life:

I broke off the engagement because I did not want to get married. I was in total conflict with marriage. Part of me wanted to be married, although I never wanted children. I thought marriage was the American way. The other part of me did not want to marry because I always felt like if I married a guy, there would have to be a woman in my life. I would have to have this. I think that really kept me from getting into a heterosexual marriage.

Paula is grateful that “no-one pressured me into getting married.” Even her grandparents, who were the guiding light in her life after her mother died, never pressured their eldest grand-daughter – “their jewel” – to marry.

When Paula got her teaching degree, she decided to move to California. Although she dated a few men in California, she was determined to be with a gay woman, “I didn’t want to be with a straight woman anymore.” She began therapy with a skilled therapist and at the end of this, Paula arrived at a turning point in her life: “I knew what I wanted clearly now. I knew who I was. I told my therapist I was ready.” Paula was going to cruise the gay bars, but her therapist wisely referred her to a gay community center. At this point in the interview, Paula laughed, “I wasn’t even thinking about marriage at all, I was thinking about how to get into the gay community center.” Paula was worried because she had only been with straight women previously, and she was afraid she would look “too soft.” She borrowed “a man’s white shirt and a pair of jeans” so she could look “kind of boyish” for her first visit. When she finally got the courage to enter the community center she was surprised: “These women are women. They are soft, and they look like women, they are

just like me, but of a different ethnicity .....A couple of the women were butch-role women, but most of them were very soft, very pretty.”

Paula became “part of the gay world” in her Californian city. she eventually met and fell in love with a woman she spent 11 years with. When she left this relationship, she explained, “I felt like I had been married,” but she feels strongly that she has never been married “the way the world sees marriage.” Although Paula describes herself as the “nesting type” and the “committing type” she has strong reservations about the institution of marriage: “It’s frightening for me to think about getting married legally. I have a feeling it would destroy my relationship. I have seen this happen. I can feel a tremble inside right now as I think about it.”

Paula is deeply committed to Mary, the woman she has been with for 6 years, and in her view, she does not need a piece of paper to validate their relationship. While Paula sees no need for legal same-sex marriage for herself, she commented, “There are a lot of gays and lesbians who really want to get married legally. I would love to see legal marriage happen for people who want that. I think it would be just wonderful. But to me, it’s more of a threat. Maybe that has to do with a lot of marriages I have seen in my own background. Marriages with paper don’t always work.”

When I asked Paula if she thought same-sex marriage was a civil right, she responded, “Of course it is.” Her vision of what marriage should ideally be is an inclusive one:

If I could change marriage, I would change it for both gay and straight people. We should all have choice in our life. Mixed marriages should be permitted, whether you are gay or straight. I would like to see marriage become an institution in which all people can choose their partner regardless of race, color, or creed, or sexuality – and the world would accept this. I would like to see this

freedom of choice universally, around the world. I'd like to see that.

Paula is a deeply religious and spiritual woman whose life has been transformed several times by revelations. In her view, God's message to humanity is, "Let there be love." The God she knows, "never said I have to love a man or a woman." Although she is officially retired now, she continues to teach on a part-time basis. She is settled happily in the "white house with a white picket fence" she has always dreamed of having. She and Mary bought the house several years ago, when Paula made the decision to move to New England. She continues to build her relationship with Mary: "We are really working together. We are making it happen. We do our work.... We sit down on Sundays and reflect on our week together. We discuss what needs to change.... In every relationship, you have to do your work."

#### **#8 - Stacey**

Stacey was 58 years old when I interviewed her and was born in Rhode Island in 1938. She is one of two daughters in an African American family. Her father worked very hard to support the family, and as a result, she and her sister always had everything they wanted. However, even with her father's income, she explained that they had to live in a poor neighborhood, because "being Black in this region meant you could only live in certain areas." Her sister always wanted to get married, but Stacey was the rebellious one and never wanted to marry. She has never liked attending weddings, and she doesn't go to them now, "I find weddings are like funerals because they are rituals, and they are sad." She remembered attending two weddings while growing up, and she went to these "because she had to."

Stacey dated a lot of young men, right up until she graduated from college. She explained, "I was in situations in which marriage was probably supposed to be the end of the whole thing, but I would break up." Most of her friends in college did get married –



“This is what was expected of girls. In my community, the purpose of all females was to get married.” When she was 20 or 21 years old, she began to feel increasing pressure to marry, with relatives asking her, “When are you going to get married?” Stacey did not like this – “By then, I was gay. I just got tired of it.” Stacey’s solution was to move out of her parent’s house, “I had gotten to the point where there were too many questions and I didn’t like answering them.” She decided that if she was not around her family she would not have to lie to them. She was already working professionally, so at age 21 she “could do this easily.”

She went to a midwestern university to graduate school for a short time, but decided to return to New England to settle down. She had no interest at all in having children. She was busy teaching, coaching, and socializing with gay and straight friends. She became very involved with a group of gay professionals with whom she frequently traveled, often to Puerto Rico or Florida where they could attend gay clubs, and be more comfortably gay than in their home state. She made a point of going to the Olympics every four years. In her teaching career, she presented herself as straight, and this was the case until her retirement. She explained this situation carefully, “I could not live openly as a lesbian. You just could not do this. The community would not accept this. You always gave the picture that you were straight. I don’t remember anyone who was actually out.”

Becoming actively lesbian was an effortless matter for Stacey – “I don’t even know how it occurred. I was always around females.” When she went to a gay bar for the first time, she was shocked and exclaimed to her friend, “Oh my God, what is this?” Her friend was surprised and said, “Well, haven’t you ever been to one of these?” “Well, no” Stacey replied. She sat and watched for a while, and then someone came and asked her to dance. That was the beginning of her gay life. Stacey dated a number of women casually over a period of years, until she met Sandy, the one woman who became her lifetime partner for 25 years. Tragically, Sandy died suddenly from cancer the year before this interview. Stacey’s quiet and private grief over this loss were palpable throughout the interviews. At

the same time, she seemed determined to move forward with resilience that has probably contributed considerably to the quality of her life.

Stacey and Sandy approached their living arrangement creatively. For the first 17 years, they lived together only during summer and vacations. In the last 8 years of their relationship, they lived together in a house they jointly owned. They traveled together frequently, which they both loved, and seemed to enjoy an adventurous lifestyle with a circle of gay and straight friends. They did break up several times, but always got back together again. Unfortunately, Sandy died without a will, and her relatives descended on her home after her death to claim various items. Stacey was shocked by their disrespect, and after being pushed to the limit, finally went to get a lawyer. She learned from this painful experience that lesbian couples with property in common need to have a good lawyer – “You should have a lawyer no matter what, I found that out.”

In Stacey’s view, marriage refers specifically to a relationship between a woman and a man. She does not think marriage is the appropriate container for same-sex couples. She describes herself as a “committing” type, but not a “marrying” type. She explained to me, “I have been listening to and trying to feel through in my head exactly how I see same-sex marriage, and I don’t have an answer yet. It’s only the rights that I want. I do not want to be married.” She believes that “committed” lesbian and gay couples should have all the rights that married people have. She also believes that if same-sex marriage were legal, “I would probably be more open with friends and with the straight world. She pointed out, similarly to other women I interviewed, that legalizing same-sex marriage will not end discrimination against gay people – “With my extended family, there is always a dig about the queer, ‘Oh, she likes women.’ ” She concluded, “See, discrimination against gays will never change.”

(next page)

### **#10 - Janet**

(I have presented Janet's life-story in detail in the Results and Discussion section. Please refer to this for detailed information about Janet).

Janet was 58 years old when I interviewed her and was born in South-Eastern Massachusetts in 1939, as the first daughter in a Portuguese American, Catholic family. Janice never wanted to marry, has never been interested in men, and never wanted children. She always knew she was gay from early in her life, and when she left home at age 17 to work in a local textile factory, she quickly became involved with a woman. After a number of years in "the secret life," she met the woman who became the love of her life. She and Mary developed a wonderful relationship, and after 7 years, decided to have a real wedding ceremony, with all of their gay friends, a buffet, and dancing. This wedding was the most important turning point in Janet's life. She always felt happy and secure with Mary. They were together for 17 years, which Janet called, "the best years of my life." Sadly, as with Stacey, Janet's partner died very suddenly from stomach cancer at the age of 42. And, as with Stacey and Sandy, Janet and Mary had no legal protections for their relationship. When Mary died, Janet's role in the family decision-making about the funeral and burial was over. Her one regret is that she was not able to arrange a burial plot in which they could both be buried together. This one wish was denied her, and this continues to sadden her.

Mary's last words to Janet were, "Find someone, don't be alone." Janet would like to marry again, if she met the right woman, but this has not yet happened. Hopefully, Janet will find a woman with whom she can share mutual trust and love. Until then, she's driving a bus up and down the Eastern Seaboard, and into Canada, for a large touring business.

## **Appendix B: Interview Guide**

## Interview Guide

At conclusion of three pretest interviews - October 14, 1996

### I. Terminology

- *Same-sex civil marriage is not legal in any state in the country.*
- *Civil marriage is distinct from "religious ceremonies" which may or may not precede the issuance of a marriage license for male-female couples.*
- *Legal civil marriages are distinct from "domestic partnership" initiatives.*  
Domestic partnership refers to non-married relationships in which a small number of specific benefits have been recognized by a local city council or a private corporation.

### II. Demographic questionnaire

### III. Begin interview

#### Research Question #1:

How has heterosexual civil marriage affected your life? What marriage-related emotions, meanings and experiences are reported by the informant?

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#### Life experiences, meaning and emotions associated with [het] marriage

- (1) Tell me about the very first wedding you remember – or the first marriage-related memory that come to your mind?

**Probes:** Were you actually attending this wedding? Why were you there?

Do you remember how old you were?

What was this wedding like for you?

Do you remember any strong emotions? [positive? negative?]

- (2) Tell me about any **other weddings or marriage-related experiences** you remember from childhood or early adulthood?

- (3) Did you remember **wanting** to get married when you were young ( a child, a teenager?)

**Probes:** Do you remember any fantasies you had about marrying?

Did you imagine what marriage would be like for you?

Did you fantasize about marrying a man?

- (4) Did you grow up in a family that taught you to **value** marriage? What did your parents communicate to you about marriage?

- (5) What was your parents' marriage like?

**Previously married:**

- (6) Why did you marry your (1st, 2nd, 3rd) husband?

**Probes:**

Tell me about your wedding to your [1st, 2nd, 3rd] husband?

Are you divorced or still married?

Why did you divorce? (or Why are you still married?)

- (7) What lead up to your **commitment** to marry your (1st, 2nd, 3rd) husband?

**Probes:**

When did you know you were committed to marrying him?

Did you see each other a lot prior to this? [dating?]

**Never-married:**

- (8) You have never been heterosexually married? Why have you never married?

**Probes:**

Have you ever had a committed relationship with a man?

If so, what prevented you from marrying in this relationship?

**Identity /self concept****Previously married**

- (9) Has your experience of heterosexual marriage with your (1st, 2nd, 3rd husband) shaped **who you are**? Has it influenced **your sense of who you are / your self concept**?

**Never-married**

- (10) Though you have never been an “insider” to heterosexual marriage, do you feel that heterosexual marriage, as an institution, has shaped who you are?  
Has it influenced your sense of who you are / your self concept?

**Feeling, meaning, purpose**

- (11) What do you **FEEL** about heterosexual marriage right now, as we speak?

- (12) **previously married:**  
Did your experience of **heterosexual marriage** bring out **the best or the worst** in you?

**Never-married:**

In general do you think **heterosexual marriages** bring out **the best or the worst** in the partners?

- (13) What, in your view, is the meaning and purpose of heterosexual marriage?

**end of questions for research question #1**

**Research Question #2:**

**Were there particularly influential experiences that changed how the informant feels and thinks about heterosexual marriage and same-sex marriage?**

- (14) As you scan your whole life up until the present moment, do you see any important **turning points** with regard to your feeling and thoughts about the institution of heterosexual marriage?
- (15) Are there any experiences associated with heterosexual marriage that stand out more **vividly** than others? Which ones? What emotions are associated with this experience?
- (16) If you could live your whole life over with respect to whatever interactions you have had with heterosexual marriage, is there **anything you would do differently**?
- (17) Did identifying as a lesbian / coming out as a lesbian in any way affect your feelings or thoughts about heterosexual marriage and same-sex marriage?
- (18) Do you have any feelings when heterosexual friends, co-workers, or associates use the language of “wife” or “husband” when discussing their spouses with you?

**Probes:**

What language do you **use now** to refer to your lesbian lover?

If you could **legally** marry her, would you use this same language?



- (19) When you go to a doctor's office, or dentist's office and you have to fill out those forms, how do you respond to the slots "married" or "single"? Does this trigger any thoughts or feelings for you?
- (20) Have you had – or thought about having – a commitment ceremony with your lover, even though legal marriage is not yet an option?  
If yes, why? Tell me about what this meant for you.  
If no, why?
- (21) Have you ever attended a commitment ceremony for a lesbian or gay friend?

**Probe:**

If so, what was this like for you? Any strong emotions?

If not, would you like to?

end of questions for research question #2

**Research Question #3:**

What are informant's views on the meaning and purpose of legal same-sex marriage?

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- (22) Prior to participating in this project, have you thought much about same-sex marriage?

**Probe:**

Is access to legal same-sex marriage at all important to you? Why or why not?

- (23) Right now, what are your **feelings and thoughts** about same-sex marriage?

- (24) Now that you have lived a pretty long life, do you think of yourself as basically the “marrying type”? Why? Why not?

**Probe:**

Have you always held this view about yourself?

- (25) What, for you , would be **the central meaning and purpose of same-sex marriage**? Would it be the same or different from the central meaning and purpose of legal heterosexual marriage?
- (26) Based upon your knowledge about heterosexual marriages today (whether as an insider or outsider), **what “improvements”** – if any – would you try to bring into a lesbian marriage? That is, what would you want to be different in a “lesbian marriage”?

end of questions for research question #3

**Research Question #4:**

What are the informant’s views on the impact that access to legal same-sex marriage would have on the quality of lesbian intimate //s?

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**Current // and the meaning of ssm**

**Commitment**

- (27) a) How long do you envision your current relationship lasting?
- b) Do you feel **committed** to your partner?
- c) When did you know you were committed to her?
- d) Did you see each other a lot prior to feeling “committed”? [dating?]

- (28) Have you had any **thoughts or feelings** about the idea of considering legal same-sex marriage as an option with your current or potential lover?
- (29) If you and your lover had the option to legally marry, and you chose to do so, do you think marriage would **bring out the best in you**?
- (30) Would access to legal marriage influence in any way how you feel about yourself as a lesbian right now?
- (31) Would access to legal marriage influence in any way how you feel about your partner?
- (32) If you could legally “marry” your lover, do you see any **advantages** for doing so? (positive consequences?)
- (33) If you could legally “marry” your lover, do you see any **disadvantages** for doing so? (negative consequences?)
- (34) In general, how do you think access to legal marriage would affect the quality of lesbian intimate relationships?

**Probe:** In what way?

a) satisfaction?

b) longevity?

- (35) In your view, does heterosexual marriage contribute to the social support experienced by heterosexual married couples?

⇒ Do you think legal same-sex marriage would contribute to social support experienced by committed lesbian couples? In your own relationship?

- (36) Have you paid a price in your life as a result of NOT being able to legally marry a lesbian lover?

**end of questions for research question #4**

**Research Question #5:**

**Does the informant view marriage as a basic civil right that should be accessible to all citizens? Is the informant aware of political efforts currently in the lesbian and gay community to obtain legal recognition of same-sex marriage? If so, how does the informant view this effort?**

**Marriage as a civil right:**

- (37) Do you regard marriage as a basic civil right? Are you aware of political efforts currently in the lesbian and gay community to obtain legal recognition of same-sex marriage? If so, how do you view this effort?

**End of interview**

- (38) Is there anything you would like to talk about that I have not mentioned? Have I left out a question that seems important to you?

## **Appendix C: Consent Forms**

The University of Rhode Island  
Department of Psychology  
Kingston, RI 02881

OLDER LESBIAN VIEWS OF "MARRIAGE" AND "SAME-SEX MARRIAGE":  
A STUDY OF MEANINGS AND EMOTIONS OVER THE LIFESPAN

**CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH**

I have been asked to take part in a research project described below. I understand that the researcher will describe the project to me in detail and I should feel free to ask questions at any time. Jean Powell, the person mainly responsible for this study, is available at (401) 782-1791 to discuss any questions I might have. I may also contact Dr. Bernice Lott at the Psychology Department of the University of Rhode Island to discuss any questions I have at (401) 874-4248.

The project I have been asked to participate in is a life story study of older lesbian experiences and emotions associated with marriage. **Older lesbians in this study are women who are fifty years of age or older. All participants in this study are women who identify as lesbian and are currently in an intimate relationship with a woman.** As a participant in this study I will be asked to discuss my experiences and emotions associated with male-female marriage. I will also be asked to talk about my responses to the possible legalization of same-sex marriage and the impact this might have on the quality of intimate lesbian relationships.

If I decide to participate in this project, I consent to the following activities:

- 1) I will participate in one or possibly two interview sessions with Jean Powell, a lesbian researcher. In the event that all the interview questions are completed in the first interview, a second interview will not be necessary. I understand that I may refuse to answer any question, for any reason, if I so desire. All information from the interviews will remain confidential.
- 2) If all the interview questions are completed in one interview, the researcher will contact me by phone one or two weeks later to ask if there are any corrections and / or additions I would like to make to my interview. If a second interview is scheduled to complete the set of questions, the researcher will ask me at this time whether I have corrections and / or additions to my comments in the first interview. This will ensure that the researcher represents my personal views and feelings as accurately as possible.
- 3) The researcher will record the interview with a tape recorder. I may request at any time that the tape recorder be turned off. My decision to turn off the tape recorder in no way prevents my ability to continue in the interview. The tape recordings will be transcribed by Jean Powell and an assistant typist to permit further analysis by the researcher. Only the researcher and typist will have access to the interview recordings.

### Benefits or Risks

Although I may not receive direct benefit from participating in this study, taking part in this study may help to inform contemporary policy debates on extending the freedom to marry to gay and lesbian people. Participation in this study is not expected to be harmful to me, but it is possible that questions in the interview may raise upsetting memories related to marriage. If I am not satisfied for any reason with the way this study is performed, I may write or call the University of Rhode Island's Director of Research, 70 Lower College Road, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI 02881, telephone (401) 792-2635. I may also discuss my complaints directly with Jean Powell (401) 782-1791 or with her research advisor, Dr. Bernice Lott (401-874-4248).

### Confidentiality

My part in this study is confidential. None of the information will identify me by name. Audio tapes of the interviews will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in Dr. Bernice Lott's office in room #419 Chafee Building at the University of Rhode Island. Information from the interviews may be discussed with the researcher's academic advisors, however this will not be done in any way that would allow my identification. Information from this study may be selected for professional presentation, but this will not permit my identification.

### Decision to Quit at any Time

The decision to participate in this study is voluntary and I may stop at any time. If I decide to participate, I will sign this consent form. If I wish to quit at any time I will simply inform Jean Powell of my decision at (401) 782-1791. If I need to re-schedule an interview that we have mutually agreed upon, I will make every effort to do so at least 24 hours in advance.

### Signature of Consent

I have read the consent form and my questions have been answered. My signature on this form means that I understand the information and agree to participate in this study. My "yes" or "no" response to the three questions below will not impact my ability to participate in this study.

- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| _____ Yes _____ No | I consent to the use of selected interview material for academic or professional purposes, provided that it is presented in a manner which does not permit my identification. |
| _____ Yes _____ No | I would like Jean Powell to send me a complete copy of the written research upon completion of this study.  |
| _____ Yes _____ No | I would like to be contacted by Jean Powell should she decide to conduct further research.  |

---

Signature of Participant

---

Signature of Researcher

---

Printed Name

---

Printed Name

---

Date

---

Date

The University of Rhode Island  
 Department of Psychology  
 Kingston, RI 02881

OLDER LESBIAN VIEWS OF "MARRIAGE" AND "SAME-SEX MARRIAGE" :  
 A STUDY OF MEANINGS AND EMOTIONS OVER THE LIFESPAN

**CONSENT FORM FOR AUDIO-TAPING**

My "yes" or "no" response to the questions below does not impact on my ability to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No      I consent to the use of a tape recorder during each interview with Jean Powell.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No      I consent to the permanent retention of audio-tapes by Jean Powell at the conclusion of this research project in the event that analysis is needed to support future research. Any future analysis will maintain my confidentiality.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Signature of Researcher

---

Printed Name

---

Printed Name

---

Date

---

Date



**Appendix D:**  
**Demographic Questionnaire**

Name	Age
Street	Birthdate
Town	Participant Number Y N
Telephone	Previously Married

Identified as a lesbian for how long?

How long in current intimate lesbian relationship ?

Number of prior lesbian relationships?

Still married?      Y      N      Divorce date from most recent marriage?

How many times previously married?

How long for each marriage?

First intimate relationship with a woman?      DATE (      )      AGE (      )

First intimate relationship with a man?      DATE (      )      AGE (      )

Ethnic identification?

Ethnic composition of your **current lesbian relationship**?

**CIRCLE**    Both Ethnic      Bi-racial      Both Euro-American

Ethnic composition of your **previous (most recent) marriage**?

**CIRCLE**    Both Ethnic      Bi-racial      Both Euro-American

Occupation (self)?      Occupation (lesbian partner)?      Occupation (husband)?

Education level (self)?	Education level (lesbian partner)?	Education level (husband)?
<input type="checkbox"/> Highschool	<input type="checkbox"/> Highschool	<input type="checkbox"/> Highschool
<input type="checkbox"/> Some College	<input type="checkbox"/> Some College	<input type="checkbox"/> Some College
<input type="checkbox"/> College Degree	<input type="checkbox"/> College Degree	<input type="checkbox"/> College Degree
<input type="checkbox"/> Some graduate	<input type="checkbox"/> Some graduate	<input type="checkbox"/> Some graduate
<input type="checkbox"/> Graduate degree	<input type="checkbox"/> Graduate degree	<input type="checkbox"/> Graduate degree

Current religious practice, if at all?

Children? Grand children?

**Appendix E:**  
**Sample Code File**

Research Question #1 - how het. marriage has affected your life.

1/1- first wedding experiences?

son's catholic wedding

- a time of letting go, and celebration

- I was glad I was part of my son growing up - from a child to a man

I never ever regretted having children

Difference between lesbians who have children and those who don't:

- Ls w/ children have learned to give and not expect in return

-some Ls (w/o children) do not understand giving freely

learning from children:

- children push you to become aware of the good in you

- parenting builds stronger character, flexibility

- children teach you that you are not a perfect person!

- children are so honest - you learn from your children

- your influence on your children is limited

- you learn a lot as a parent

- "children have their way of also making sometimes a parent grow up. They have their way of.....they have their way for a parent to recognize that the commitment to a child is a very strong commitment." [wow]

[memo - note - this is truly one of the motivations for this research project, because ssm connects intimately with the issue of Ls raising children. That legal structure is in many ways a protection for having children. So if you are raising children with another woman, and you have no legal support it is very hard. This is why ssm is so important for us]

when you die you ask to see the people you have been emotionally connected with.

you meet lesbians and they're not grounded....Why?

There's not a lot of commitment in the lesbian world.

Het. marriage attitudes:

- I still love my husband, but its a diff. form of love, it's love that dev'ls out of respect, compatibility, friendship
- he is a good man, a nice man
- for some reason, love w/ a woman seems deeper

love w/ a woman:

- can't get to level of intimacy, gut feeling, joy w/ a man that I feel w/ a woman
- there is a spiritual connection with a woman - its a spiritual, intangible thing.

het. marriage attitudes:

- I tried to live in het. world - but it was never me
- felt incomplete, emptiness

\*diff. between Ls w/o children ( never married) and Ls w/ children:

- Ls who say "I own this, you own that."
- they don't understand universal sharing. (that occurs in a marriage)

1/3 - wanting to marry?

het marriage attitudes:

- I wanted to be like everyone else, I wanted to be married to a man
- felt more comfortable / safer with women

-emotional intimacy I found only w/ women

- I did not really trust men until I had my son / son helped me a lot with that issue

1/5- parent's marriage?

parent's marriage

- a lot of struggle, a lot of arguing, very dysfunctional

- I vowed that my life would not be like my parents, for example, Keith and I hardly ever argued.

1/6 - Why did you marry?

Pos. motivations:

- respected Keith

- proving to myself I was not a lesbian (after almost expelled from college)

- very traumatic exp. at college - torn from 1st love

- tremendous fear of being lesbian

- could not have gotten through marriage if Keith had not been the very gentle man he was.

- cared about Keith, had fun with him

Down side:

- couldn't make love sexually with Keith , didn't know why

- self-esteem in business, but no self-esteem in personal life

-hiding inside (hiding lesbian self), not strong enough to come out

-was in counseling 15 years - would never have come out of herself w/o this

- sexual difficulties in marriage/ kept rejecting Keith:

- I didn't know what my problem was. I really didn't know. It was very confusing and I really didn't know.

- that's why we need to have education in schools about sexual orientation

[memo 7/3 - note imp. of "integrity of self" - being honestly oneself - this journey to be oneself].

1/6 - Why did you divorce?

cause for divorce:

- Keith wanted to stay in this false marriage, he felt content
- 15 years earlier had told Keith that continuing in this marriage would not be fair to him.
- he had a right to be loved in a way I couldn't love him
- "...we would both be retired. I thought I can't go that route in life. I can't do it. I couldn't do it. It was too false."
- \* [deep need for integrity of self]
- Laurie initiated divorce/ Laurie had to push

Consequences of divorce:

- Keith is happier now
- he knows if he ever needed me I would be there
- "We try to help out each other entertaining so no one person in the family is doing everything to hold the family together. And it shows an effort that we all trying to hold the family together. Not that we have to hold it together, but that we enjoy being a family."

getting divorce: no crisis

- moved slowly, consistently, always kept him informed

[7/1- memo - note that this whole journey to lesbian lifestyle involved FAR more pain and turmoil than Laurie indicates here to me, i.e. as corrected by her post-interview phone call to me. See Addendum.]

1/7 - commitment?

commitment:

- felt safe, admired him, had fun, he was not pushy with me.
- \* we both had a bit of emotional distance
- "even after he found out that I was a lesbian he still liked the idea of being married and coming home and I was still here. Even though there was no sexual encounters between us. "

called wedding off once / then agreed

- he was easygoing
- "I am comfortable with him. All the time I had ever been with him.
- it was not a romance, we were friends, like two equals

1/9 - Marriage and self-concept?

"I know it increased my ego, my self concept. It was positive. My sense of self worth. Keith always seemed to support me in whatever I wanted to do."

1/11- feelings about het. marriage?

Feelings/attitudes about marriage:

"I think that we all have our own path that we take in life. I feel that that's what I was supposed to do because of all the factors that led me to follow that path."

\*\* "So whatever I was supposed to serve for him apparently I did. Whatever Keith was supposed to do for me apparently he did. WE are both healthy successful people. He is very successful in what he is doing in his life. I feel that I am successful in what I am doing in my own life."



1/12 - brought out best/worst?

Feelings/attitudes about marriage:

the good part -

"yes. It brought out a very a lot of positive things in the sense that because of his respect for me I was not the meek person and his faith in me too to be able to handle situations and make good decisions."

the hard part -

the one thing I did not feel good about was having the sex

- [ Not being able to connect with Keith emotionally/spiritually/sexually motivated L's quest ]

- "to live my life as to who I am. I learned in counseling that you have to honor who you are. That was kind of a very important lesson for me."

- "for a good part of my life I rejected who I was. In favor of honoring someone else's feelings. In favor of honoring what other people expected."

- It was hard for me to say, well I need to be who I am for me.

[7/1 - memo - note similarity here with R. - coming out as a lesbian is "something I did for me."]

growth as a motivation for divorce:

"I want to make each year of my life better because I should be able to be gathering experiences and knowledge that make your life better."

1/13- Purpose of het. marriage?

central purpose = 2 children

[7/1 - memo - purpose of het. marriage for R., J., L. equals "having children" and getting married was only way to do that].

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Research question #2 - Influential Experiences / turning points?

2/14 - turning pts?

- the birth of my children, the birth of my daughter was like a miracle

down side of marriage:

- situations where I wanted to be affectionate w/ a woman
- knew I had to address that issue

year 15 in marriage - started business, a lot of stress

- "so-called what looked like a marriage but really wasn't a marriage situation I wasn't getting the nurturing and the feeding from that."
- I had to make a change in my life
- it was too frustrating. I was very frustrated

2/15 - vivid experiences?

called college lover, M., who had been with women all the time

told M., I am a lesbian

started going out to clubs

met J., woman she was involved w/ for 8 years

ended 8 year // with joan/ went into counseling

twinkle in eyes - I feel closer to women

2/16-do anything differently?

I made the best decisions for myself that I could

I would like to not have been raped

I would like to not have been almost thrown out of college

2/17 - coming out as a lesbian and feelings about het. marriage?

being lesbian had a tremendous impact on my marriage:

\*core need: sexuality that feeds the spirit missing in marriage

incredible example: "The spirit makes the master."

- you can be self-motivated to a pt. / children motivate you further / a lover and deep sexuality motivate you further - you have more compassion for other people

You put LOVE into it, and people become more gentle and kind.

2/18 - husband / wife language?

forms at doctor's offices - "For the rest of my life I cannot say to someone- This is my husband."

2/20 - had a commitment ceremony?

would I legally marry a woman - I would have to consider my children

2/21 - other ceremonies?

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Research question #3 - meaning and purpose of SSM

3/22

the right to marry another woman is my right

it's just like before when Black people could not marry White people

3/24

Oh, yes I do

- I don't jump around

3/25 - purpose of ssm?

Purpose of SSM:

Well, for me I'm thinking as I am moving into old age- it would be probably security-  
benefits, hospital insurance.

3/26

Improvements in ssm:

- none - can set up property agreements in advance

The rules would be the same.

Research question #4 - impact of legal SSM on quality of lesbian//?

4/27 - commitment?

what would lead up to commitment w/ a woman?

-trust, respect, fun, humility, wisdom, curiosity, romantic-creatively romantic,  
communication, chemistry.

- Communication, that would be on my top 3. To be able to communicate. Trust and respect and communication would be my top 3.

4/30- how you feel about yourself?

legal ssm would validate lesbian and gay community

- I don't see it affecting my self-concept that way. I can say that it would add validation to the entire community type of thing.
- it would validate that we are just human beings like everybody else

4/32 - advantages?

- more serious commitment
- cause less turnover in //s
- that would add some stability to the community
- maybe add children to the community and we could all share in the stabilities

4/33- disadvantages?

the same concern I see for heterosexual marriages- marrying too young

4/34 - impact on quality of //?

Pos. impact of legal ssm:

"I think that you will find homosexual partners in long-term //s to be very committed. They handle it just like any het. marriage. They stay with it through differences. They have differences and they work them out. They learn a new respect for each other, sometimes that comes out of it. I wish there were more good, long-term gay //s."

4/35 - social support?

yes, more social support:

- status of // acknowledged by neighbors
- living together as an honest couple
- discrimination against Blacks is the same, but now blacks and whites can marry and its accepted, it will be commonplace for us too, in the future

4/36 - price?

\* There is no question in my mind that I have paid a price because in my day and era I think any time you are not allowed to be free you pay a price. You pay an emotional price, you pay a price in even your own progress and personal development and health.

[and you might have fantasized about marrying a woman and raising children with her]

\* I probably would have. There would have been no question that I would have done that. There is no question. If I knew that it was okay back then, then I would have probably looked to marry a woman. There's no question. If you know that door is open you would walk through that door as long as you know on the other side it was safe. Otherwise, I felt that if I walked though that door I felt that it was not a safe place to be. Could've been a dangerous place. It was. I would have never been a teacher because I would have gotten expelled from college.

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Research question #5 - Civil right?

yes.

...."That's the thing about right and wrong. Who is to say you had all the southern states that allowed slavery saying it was right. Now you have politicians saying that it is wrong for lesbian and gay people to be married, but these people who they represent who are gay

and lesbians are saying there is nothing wrong with it. That it is their constitutional right. Lincoln believed that the slaves were human beings. But he felt that they shouldn't have any rights. He didn't think that if he freed them from slavery, which as President he was empowered to do, he never thought what would they do? Are they human enough to own land? Are gay and lesbian people human enough to own land, or to have children? The issue is really the same and it is the same issue with women – the rule of thumb. So women had to come and fight for rights, and they used to say, “well, women can not work out in the workforce.”

- good will be protected, that is the key
- the issue of ssm will move
- people will realize that lesbian and gay people are sincere in their love

key concern:

diff. between ls w/o children (never married) and ls w/ children (married)

addendum - struggle for authenticity

left out:

- how much of a struggle it was for me to live as a lesbian
- I HAD to go out and be myself as a lesbian
- I did not have a choice
- I was having serious emotional blackouts, trying to repress my feelings for women
- we must be who we ARE
- I TRIED to be heterosexual - made me emotionally/ physically sick
- i went through a terrible struggle to be who I am
- consequences of no access to L. community
- NO-one can convince me that if you are homosexual you can change

- you can NOT go against your grain
- being heterosexual is against my grain
- I felt I was FORCED to be heterosexual
- I was in so much pain, borderline being institutionalized
- love BENEFITS society
- there is NO WAY legal ssm can hurt society
- "Family" supports sharing, and too many (unmarried) Ls are self-centered



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